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**Words into Worlds**

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# Words into Worlds

by

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

To Grandma Gerry, who nurtures my love of words and story,

&

To Grandma Sue, who nurtures my love of song and spectacle.

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## **Abstract**

### **Words into Worlds**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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This thesis will articulate the ways I use words to build worlds, channeling my love of lyrical language into sustainable craft practices by mapping out a cycle of tools I use in making my work. I will investigate how my own experiences of conflict and code-switching teach me to pay attention to language as a basis for story and character. Using examples from my plays *Bog Butter* and *Webbed Hands* and my opera *Good Country* (with cameos by the other work I've made during graduate school), I will chart how the meanings and physicalities of language can teach us the values, tensions, and potential stories latent in a fictional world. I'll examine how I've used these insights in generative writing and in the revision process. And I will marvel at how clarifying my relationship to trauma and language has helped me more confidently trust myself as an artist and as a human.

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## **PROCESS PAPER**

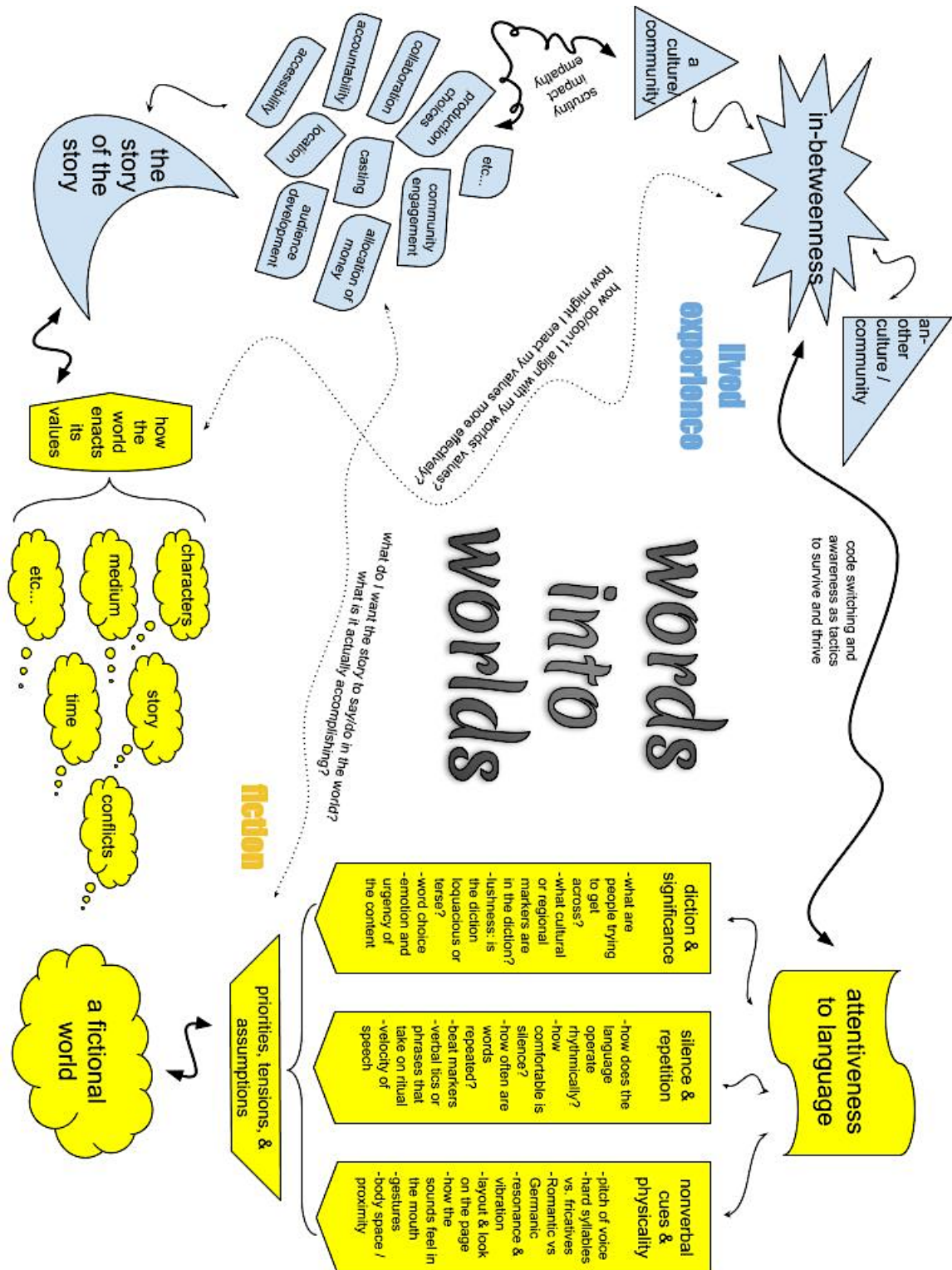


## An Abstract and a Cycle

This thesis will articulate the ways I use words to build worlds, channeling my love of lyrical language into sustainable craft practices by mapping out a cycle of tools I use in making my work. I will investigate how my own experiences of conflict and code-switching teach me to pay attention to language as a basis for story and character. Using examples from my plays *Bog Butter* and *Webbed Hands* and my opera *Good Country* (with cameos by the other work I've made during graduate school), I will chart how the meanings and physicalities of language can teach us the values, tensions, and potential stories latent in a fictional world. I'll examine how I've used these insights in generative writing and in the revision process. And I will marvel at how clarifying my relationship to trauma and language has helped me more confidently trust myself as an artist and as a human.

My attempt to articulate my process around language and world-building began intuitively with a cyclical map. I almost never write sequentially or use the same order of construction for any two pieces, so it made most sense to me to chart process as a choose-your-own-adventure that can be used in any order. While this thesis focuses mostly on what I've discovered about my own idiosyncratic artistic pathways, I've been grateful to be able to listen in on other writers investigating their own artistic processes through workshops, observerships, and reading. I'd love for this to pay forward that gift. We're not alone in wrestling with how to tell stories, and I so appreciate being able to cannibalize and collage from what has worked for others. My hope is that my colleagues reading this can make use of my insights similarly. I've described each part of the cycle in the following chapters; please feel free to jump around as you read if that is useful to you.

Words into Worlds – a chart of process



## 1. Why: Reality Sparks Attention

Words, and the stories they make, have been my drug of choice since childhood. I loved reading before I could even really do it, and particularly loved it during periods of stress. Losing myself in a story is still my go-to coping mechanism whenever I encounter pain. I knew that my lifelong habit of hauling a giant pile of books home from the library on a weekly basis was certainly part of my choice to pursue a career as a storyteller. But it took me until these years in graduate school to dig deeper than my surface-level enjoyment of narrative, facing some of the pain that fuels my passion for words.

Articulating why I pay attention to specific linguistic cues feels a little like being a fish trying to describe water. Often language functions almost as an autonomic process; we speak and write the way we speak and write, and only heightened moments of focus or irregularity cause us to pay attention to the way we're making those automatic choices. Just as we needn't think about our heartbeat or breathing unless we're meditating or panicking or having a medical emergency, we choose our words carefully only when some pressure reminds us that we can.

Examining the origins of how I approach language has often meant looking at and through traumas; when I look at where I learned a habit, it usually turns out to have originated as a survival tactic. I'm someone who pays close attention to the nonverbal or physical qualities of language, responding more to tone of voice or body language than the words being said, especially if that tone or gesture indicates anger or sadness. I've been fascinated to learn that many children who grow up around a fair amount of adult conflict develop a similar intense attentiveness to physical cues (Cannin-Schuck, "Children of

Divorce and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’). If you can tell when rage or cruelty is about to erupt, you can better work to diffuse it or protect yourself from its impact.

It's worth noting that I speak from a perspective of both experience and relative privilege here. In my case, most of what I was escaping when I dove headfirst into absorbing fiction was my parents' contentious and drawn-out divorce. The emotional, financial, and (thankfully rare) bodily conflict I would learn to navigate began when I was around five years old and my little sister was one, and lasted until she turned eighteen. I'm blessed that the violence I witnessed only became physical a few times; I know this sort of trauma and hypervigilance goes much farther for others. I feel grateful that I've been able to translate some of that attentiveness into artistically useful tools, and I share its origins in an effort to be transparent about how personal reflection has led me to professional craft. While sometimes pain carves out new possibility, what I'm not trying to do here is claim that trauma has a silver lining or lends credibility to interesting artistic insights.

As a child, I learned early that I had to speak one language to my Dad and entirely another to my Mom. If I used a word or phrase at one house that I'd learned at the other, chances were I'd get a lecture about how poorly that other parent was rearing us. Or worse, I'd be asked to act as a go-between, ferrying nasty messages across their vast divide. Every two weeks, my sister and I packed up our toothbrushes and toys and switched houses, shedding one parent's unwritten rules and remembering the other's. At Dad's house we were Jewish; at Mom's house they spoke in tongues and claimed the healing power of Jesus. At Dad's house we loved to travel; at Mom's house we hoarded canned goods in case of the coming apocalypse. We lived in between two worlds, never fully fitting into either. While I

didn't yet know the term, I quickly became adept at code-switching, studying the world around me for clues about how I should behave the way the protagonists in the novels I devoured examined their crime scenes and magical mysteries.

Studies in psychology and public health have shown that childhood trauma can lead both to a lifetime of hypervigilance and to greater levels of empathy (Greenberg, "Elevated empathy in adults following childhood trauma"). I know both have been true for me. As I've grown into adulthood, I've worked hard to cultivate healthier instincts around relationships than the ones I learned in order to survive my parent's marriage and divorce. When I married my spouse, Ben, a few years before applying to grad schools, I went in expecting our relationship to require constant work to escape spiraling into marriage's natural state: conflict. Though being married has turned out to be a thriving joy, I found I was often just the tiniest bit resentful of how much energy it took—what might I be writing, I wondered, if I weren't spending so much time figuring out how to live with this exhausting other human in such close quarters? Was the stress of grad school finally going to force me to follow in my parents' footsteps, despite all my best intentions and hard work?

Ultimately, beyond my excitement about the program itself, one of the reasons I chose the Michener Center and UT was the faculty's clear prioritization of their families and the families of their students. I was eager, and also very afraid that prioritizing growth as a writer would put unbearable pressure on my personal relationships. Now, as I reflect on my time in grad school, I find I want to try reading that fear backward. How have my experiences with relationships equipped me as a writer? What artistic tactics have I learned from all that code-switching and in-betweenness and sadness and frustration, all that hard

work and skill required to keep my heart tied to another's? To catalogue all the many answers to those questions would be beyond the scope of this document. Here I'll focus on one: in navigating relationship as the flawed, loving, hurt and healing person I am, I've cultivated great attentiveness to linguistic details.

If anger and grief have been a powerful undertow in my life, one way I found to not get sucked out to sea was to cultivate intense, detailed awareness of social and verbal cues. This thesis is born of a desire to name more clearly some of the gifts that hyper-attentiveness has given me as a writer. One of the reasons I find this nitty-gritty linguistic work so powerful is that it feels like turning an Achilles heel of anxiety into a superpower of craft skill.

## 2. How: Attention → Values → Tension

The result of that intense attentiveness to language is that it constantly invites me to gather clues about feelings, urgency, and needs, even from seemingly innocuous linguistic events. Often subtle and subconsciously received, these clues teach me what the speaker values. These tiny linguistic cues are one of my most cherished writerly tools. They offer me evidence of what an individual cares about, and how they enact that care.

Systems of language in dialogue showcase the values of the culture in which the speakers live. We all discern instinctively what sorts of silence are natural, comfortable, allowed, or awkward in any given circumstance. I know without thinking that the loud, interruption-heavy, intense banter at my grandmother's Manhattan Seder table calls for different language behavior on my part than the vast expanses of silence that reign at my spouse's grandparent's Methodist Thanksgiving table.

The leap, as a creator of fiction, is when I delve into these details and question them. Why is it that at one table you must interrupt to be heard and silence is rare? Why can the other table only host conversation in the form of terse requests to pass the salt? Assuming my linguistic instincts are correct and these small choices to speak or be silent have meaning, how might each of these elements of language be speaking to the deeper values of that culture/world/community/family? After all, we develop instincts for a reason.

Playing out these questions, I find that the louder and denser speech at Seder is derived from a shared familiarity with a religion that canonizes its minority opinions, constructing sacred text that is literally a transcribed set of positions and dissents. Directly

conflicting statements are held up as equally sacred, their very friction pointing to the presence of the divine: “These and these are the words of the living G-d.”<sup>1</sup> There’s also a series of experiences of oppression, from the spectre of the pogroms that drove us across an ocean to the Holocaust to the threat of contemporary antisemitism. These combine with our current relative economic privilege to conjure a sense that time is limited both existentially and immediately (our family is flung out across the globe; very few of us live near each other). We are collectively politically engaged, though we don’t always agree about one another’s political choices, and however subconsciously, we all carry a sense of urgency born of rushed timing and past persecution. We interrupt each other because we must get out our ideas, now, immediately. We interrupt each other because the highest way we can praise one another’s ideas is to amplify them, literally talking over them, engaging them ferociously to hone them and honor them.

On the other hand, the pragmatic and silence-riddled conversation at Thanksgiving speaks to an entirely different cultural response to its circumstances. This is a family that has survived verbal and sexual abuse, and carries within their bodies both the generational trauma of forced Cherokee assimilation and a heritage of poverty and white supremacy. Here, the theologies seek a singular true Christian doctrine, and yearn toward the day where all people will adhere to it. But at this table, however fuzzily, we all know there are some disagreements. The learned norms dance around unspoken tensions. Uncle Michael got kicked out of seminary in his youth for writing a paper about homosexuality. Baba may have voted for Trump; my mother-in-law is appalled by this. Nobody wants to talk about Papa’s

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud Eruvin 13b 10-14



failing health in the context of his second helping of sugary pie. The words chosen keep the conversation afloat in shallow waters, orbiting the food and its cooks' prowess, the song on the radio. The physical space between bodies at the table is wide, in contrast to the Manhattan apartment's cheek-by-jowl seating. There exists here no verbal mode through which these things can be discussed; kindness here is in not commenting, because when we do dive to deeper waters, there are sharks. This world is one that prioritizes emotional unavailability, companionable quiet, not "getting into it." It would be unconscionably rude to tuck in a corner and quietly read a book in the Manhattan melee; in Buffalo at Thanksgiving there are whole evenings of everyone doing just that, together, cozy.

In other words, language habits, when held up to scrutiny, yield fruitful clarity about the priorities, assumptions, and tensions of a world, fictional or otherwise. And it is in tensions that I begin to find threads of story.

Here I want to zoom in on the specific ways in which I pay attention—the qualities of that autonomic heartbeat, the exact sounds and rhythms of that unstudied breath. I look forward to a lifelong investigation of language: the linguistic ideas I find useful so far include diction and meaning, silence and repetition, and nonverbal cues and physicality.

## **DICTION & MEANING**

I don't take for granted that there are many ways my characters could choose to convey what they want to communicate. Which words do they use? Borrowing ideas from semiotics has helped me crystallize this curiosity: what are the signs these people (or beings or Bogs) use to communicate the signified ideas they intend? For example, there are about a million ways to communicate that you're having a rough time: "I'm fine," said with great

finality and tension, might serve a particular character, while another might require a soul-baring monologue that goes into great detail about the time and its roughness. Word choice, and its linked set of choices about what one wants to communicate using those words, is a window into personality for me; if I try “interviewing” a character and find they’re the sort of person who says “I’m fine,” but means entirely the opposite, I learn that character might react differently to a tough experience than the soul-baring monologuer would.

Maybe I make this discovery about a character’s word choice as I’m generating the first pages of dialogue for a new project. In that case, I use this information to form a filter through which all future dialogue passes as I write: aha, so this is a character who doesn’t want to talk about it (it being just about anything: they’re fine!). That immediately begs the question of when they’ll explode, when (if ever) they might say what they actually mean. That’s a great writing prompt to help me generate more scenes. I thrive on concrete assignments, which means that many of my hyperattentive observations about language transmute neatly into writing prompts: write the scene where that loquacious character must shut up, or where he can’t use his five favorite words, or where she must explain what she means by her jargon and finds that what she means is something awful. Or maybe I discover patterns in word choice later, as I hear a full draft aloud for the first (or eighth, or whatever) time. In that case, I use my specific knowledge about diction as a place to find edits and clarifications; the spots where a character doesn’t obey these diction rules must either be made dramatically significant or be cut.

Other aspects of significance that I use this way include cultural and regional markers in the diction, whether consciously employed to align the speaker with a group or

unconsciously embedded because they're just part of how a person learned language. This might look like the natural way characters in *Good Country* use words like “catawomptiously” or pronounce tobacco as “tobakker.” Or it might be more overt, like in *Webbed Hands* when Shashi, a central character, consciously responds to the Sea’s different grammar as she finally confronts the Sea about how her mother abandoned her:

SEA  
you were cut.

SHASHI  
For keeping me away from you.

SEA  
mine like the fish they take like the salt they dry like  
everything else they steal  
stolen your tongue  
stolen your song stolen and given you  
harsh accents, wrong words—

SHASHI  
What’d you expect, leaving me so tyke little?  
Who else were to teach me talking, then?

Shashi’s journey to find her place as a “freakyweird inbetweener” involves turning her attention toward her own language, owning the way she talks. In the world of *Webbed Hands*, humans speak the way she has learned to speak, while creatures of the sea use a different syntax. Becoming conscious of that difference leads Shashi to the heart of the play’s active dramatic question: where does she belong? She has just discovered that she’s not entirely human and might have to choose between the worlds of the Land and the Sea. So when she insists on maintaining her human grammar, it is an important step in her growth, and it forces the Sea to fight for her, driving the story forward.

As I pass a script under this lens of diction, I also consider the lushness of language: does a character speak loquaciously or tersely? How does she ornament her language? Does that change with emotion or urgency? For example, in *Bog Butter*, the characters A and B pepper their dialogue with likes and ums and self-interruptions as their norm. But when, at the end of the play, they must confront a deeply difficult choice, their conversation becomes monosyllabic. In finding A and B's system of speech, I started with a draft where each scene was as terse as possible. This beginning was the product of challenging myself not to lean on lyricism and repetition, two tools I felt I overused when I first entered graduate school. That personal prompt was supported by Steven Dietz's workshop rules that highlighted and often forbade "double sentences," phrases that did the same dramatic work twice. And so A and B's first conversations were relatively straightforward.

By the time I'd finished that first terse draft, I knew I was excited about centering a story on young women who spoke in ways that often wrote them off as ditzy or stupid. I found a lot of joy hearing these characters speak sentences riddled with likes and ums right beside complex scientific or emotional nuance. As I examined the naturalistic speech patterns of their particular group of contemporary American young women, I began to find moments to integrate and amplify those verbal tics beyond naturalism. This really took off when I started leaning into the ways young women fend off interruption. These vocalizations fill space that folks who are given more respect or societal breathing room might leave silent. For me, that socio-linguistic link helped make these diction choices feel dramatically urgent.

When he read a later draft, my professor Kirk Lynn offered me a description of this sort of language as ornamentation (rather than ditziness or immaturity, which is often how that sort of diction gets described in our wider culture). I felt freed and excited by that idea. Finding the right narrative around this diction choice meant I was able to lean into the poetry of all those likes and ums. That set me up with a powerful tool to use at the emotional climax of the play. In the last scene, I strategically stripped away all that verbal gilding and armor to reveal the characters' most vulnerable needs, which I felt made the scene hit much harder.

### **SILENCE & REPETITION**

Beyond the signifiers and signifieds of word choice, I am also intrigued by the tempo of speech. Working for the first time in the operatic world on *Good Country* taught me to concretize the ways I pay attention to silence, repetition, and tone. When the words I write were set to music and sung, it highlighted how many choices we as storytellers get to make about these aspects of language in our work. *Good Country* was the first process I'd gone through where pauses and pitches could literally be scored.

That process of collaborating with my composer, Keith Allegretti, helped me realize how the musicality of spoken speech also impacts meaning. Say I write a first draft with a phrase like "you're who you are" at a climactic moment—if this weren't sung, I might not think twice other than to ponder how the phrase sounds in terms of diction, but now Keith comes back and informs me that he wants to set that emotional peak on a high note in the singer's range. When you get up into those higher vocal registers, vowels sort of collapse

into schwas, and certain sounds are easier to sing. This makes me reexamine my word choice, looking for ways to open up the vowels, and I land on “You are who you are” instead, which soars when set to Keith’s music. I now bring that question of singability along when I approach subsequent generative work on non-musical plays, asking about the placement of long and short vowels even when the words aren’t written to be sung.

I look specifically for how I might capture on the page the musical qualities of a character’s speech. To do this, I ask questions like: how does the language operate rhythmically? How comfortable is silence? How often are words repeated? What are the beat markers between moments of dramatic motion? How far apart or close together do those lie? What is the velocity of speech? What is the sonic but also the dramatic tempo of the conversation? At what pitch are these words said or sung, and what does that signify? Are there verbal tics or phrases that take on ritual for the speakers? What are the rules of those sonic rituals?

For example, focusing in on the question of velocity, in *Webbed Hands*, Shashi dances around what she wants to say for a lot longer than A in *Bog Butter*, who blurts out that she’s gay after only a page of banter with her sister. Shashi speaks in wild metaphors and dense poetry. The challenge in *Webbed Hands* has been to let the characters be their mulling, slow-to-reveal, authentic selves, while still crafting enough dramatic turns per page or scene that the play remains engaging. These are people who take a long time to get to the point; my work has been to prune their lush language and find its essentials. I strive to find moments where urgency trumps lushness; this is absolutely still a work in progress. In my estimation, the current draft appended here takes far too long to get to the excitement of its plot, and I

want to continue recalibrating to prioritize story. These early scenes are engaging in isolation, but in aggregate they feel like false starts. How might I start the engine of the story early? I'm working to answer that question by returning to the metaphors and poetry Shashi uses and grounding those flights of wordy fancy with plot-based ballast.

Conversely, the challenge in *Bog Butter* has been to slow the characters down enough that an audience can follow their trains of thought. These are women who can finish each other's sentences and leave much unspoken, who share a vast common vocabulary and set of references that they have no reason other than exposition to explain to their audience. Because of those facts, in early drafts, most of their scenes were just the two of them talking about things they already knew or things that had already happened. For example, see the comparison figure on the next page:

An early draft of <i>Bog Butter</i> Scene 1:	A later draft with adjustments paying attention to velocity:
<p>B Does it worry you that you're still gonna go out with me tonight and we're gonna stumble home laughing louder than is socially appropriate even though we have almost no experiences in common anymore? And all the anger that you store up under your like quirky —</p> <p>A /That's a sexist word.</p> <p>B /— nerd glasses or whatever is going to go sour underneath the laughter and drinks and you're gonna like throw up and I'm gonna be the one holding your hair?</p> <p>A We don't though, do we? Have anything in common.</p> <p>B Dad, and Mom, and--</p> <p>A Ok just 'cause you're also not going to church that much anymore doesn't mean I want to like / discuss--</p> <p>B /Can we talk about how she still doesn't know that you're--</p> <p>A I will 100% stop talking to you also.</p>	<p>B Does it worry you that you're still gonna go out with me tonight to that super quaint little pub and we're gonna laugh louder than is socially appropriate even though we have almost no experiences in common anymore? And all the anger that you store up under your like quirky —</p> <p>A /That's a sexist word.</p> <p>B /— nerd glasses or whatever is going to go sour underneath the drinks and you're gonna like throw up and I'm gonna be the one washing your face?</p> <p>A We don't though, do we? Have anything in common.</p> <p>B Dad, and Mom, and--</p> <p>A I'm gay.</p> <p><i>Silence. The BOG breathes. She begins to ferment their words.</i></p> <p>B ...whoa. Ok, ok cool, ok, um, congrats? Like - I mean. No problem! Awesome! That's? Wow? Yeah. I had a couple great friends in college who - that's like completely irrelevant, sorry - what I mean is like. Wow. Thank you for telling me?</p>



Only in the process of trying to activate this scene for production (helped by the fact that our actors and director were having trouble staging the scene as anything other than the two girls sitting and chatting, which I found boring) did I find that shift from “let’s talk about how mom doesn’t know you’re gay” to “wow, you just came out to me.” I was afraid, in early drafts, to show this coming-out moment onstage, worrying the audience wouldn’t catch it in the pell-mell pace of A and B’s banter. And if they slowed down, I reasoned, it would feel too on-the-nose—an emotional moment tackled head-on, which would be deeply uncomfortable for both characters. But I discovered that it worked if I tempered A’s candidness with an immediate meltdown of word vomit from B. My work with this play as a whole has been to find ways to make slowness or explanation dramatically urgent and believable, crafting moments where they *must* slow down and breathe as a tactic to get what they urgently want.

## **NONVERBAL CUES & PHYSICALITY**

Sometimes paying attention to physical language the way I learned to as a child means an exhausting level of empathic awareness, especially if I’m in a room full of tense tones and body language. But this level of intentness has also taught me to write embodied characters driven by their kishkes as well as their brains.

Interrogating the physicality of communication can be simply about gestures—are they wide and flailing or minute and exact? Posture, body language, and physical proximity are all aspects of this element of language. But so too are the phonetic choices to make: how

do the sounds of this system of language feel in the mouth? As B says in *Bog Butter* when her sister tries to get her to adjust her language about climate change, “So sue me. I like how the words glllloballll warrrrrrming feel in my mouth. My gourmet lover says mouthfeel is very important.” (Scene 4). My goal with these lines is admittedly mostly to gift the audience a moment of laughter, but beyond that, I’m interested in inviting watchers into a gustatory experience. Might an audience member try quietly tasting the shapes of those words in their mouth? Might that set them up to more eagerly imagine the taste of the butter that drives *Bog Butter*’s plot?

Phonetics are another aspect of physicality in language, begging questions about the movements of the lips and tongue, the kinesthetic experience of language in the mouth and body. For me, phonetics are also a gateway to wonderment about the shared history of words that operate in physically similar ways. The collections of sounds in etymologically connected groups of words create different patterns of vibration and movement, different embodied experiences. From this angle, I ask whether a character (or a whole world’s language system) tends toward hard syllables or fricatives, words etymologically derived from Romantic or Germanic languages. In the world of *Webbed Hands*, I found myself constantly reexamining my choices whenever a Latinate word ended up on the page; the characters just didn’t like words that were flowery as much as they liked words that were hard and to the point. Their poetic blossoming came out of the vibration between simple words, not out of the words themselves having lots of syllables. When I craved syllables for the sake of rhythm but obeyed the etymological rules my characters wanted to follow, I found the solution was to eke new words out of combinations of old ones. These compound words help to vary the

patterns of silence and sound in my characters' speech, while still honoring their tendency for monosyllabic, consonant-heavy morphemes.

SHASHI (*Scene 1*)

Once, time ago, there were a regular normal girl what never felt freakyweird or gawked clumsy or inbetweened, sure certain no! She were sweet and she had sweet friends and everything she touched on the dirt earth turned sweet and that girl were me and she were just one thing, she belonged regular normal.

This clarity about the physical sounds of language in *Webbed Hands* has given me a lens to use in editing, which feels a little bit like a hack to my brain's system of holding onto darlings. Because this play suffers from being too long, I feel like I'm constantly looking to make cuts, and I'm eager to find ways to conquer my inner resistance to tossing out language I enjoy for the sake of story streamlining. Now when I find I've written words for these characters that have lots of syllables and fricatives and not many plosives, I know I've veered away from their true voices. I can use that red flag as an indicator of where I might be getting bogged down in poetry I enjoy that doesn't serve the story: these are places where I might need more clarity about what the characters want, or places where I might be able to make cuts, or places where something else isn't clicking yet. Thinking about phonetic physicality also helped to highlight the differences between the diction of the Sea and Land (elemental forces with different grammar and more comfort with loquaciousness) and the people of the play (who speak like Shashi does).

If I am not careful, I can forget these questions until my characters suddenly have bodies. I learn about physicality most easily when I'm in a rehearsal room with actors on their feet or singers learning music. During grad school, I've learned to intentionally

cultivate awareness of physicality earlier in my process. This crystalized most clearly for me when I began writing a novel as part of my secondary concentration in fiction. In theater, there are actors and directors whose whole job it is to help characters become embodied; in fiction that responsibility lies solely on me.

For example, I have begun asking myself more questions rooted in the physical earlier on as I generate something new. How much do these characters lean into resonance and vibration—what do their words taste like? Do they savor their syllables or mince through them? What does it do dramatically to have one character find their words bitter while another rolls sound around in their mouth to find every last umami flavor? I now hold myself to a loose rule; before sending or printing new work, I read what I've written aloud while trying to find what my body's impulses are for the words. Am I standing up straight? Am I bounding around my office? Where do I cringe or want to breathe? These questions help me figure out how to embed physicality into what I'm writing. That might look like writing further visual description in prose, or crafting different stage directions, or even reexamining how the black-and-white picture I'm making looks on the page.

It's important to me to ask what visual tools I am offering to readers and collaborators to experience and embody this language. How does this language manifest on the page as I write it? I find line breaks to be an extremely useful tool in my kit of punctuations, often employing them to indicate a hitch in thought (as opposed to traditional punctuation marks, which I use to score the length of a pause or emphasize a moment of silence: a comma is a shorter pause than a period, an ellipses is longer, etc). In writing dialogue, I treat a line break as the briefest shift, a way of scoring an inner monologue.

Matching the physical writing on the page to a play's treatment of language is one of the ways I work to communicate tone, pacing, energy. For example, *Good Country* needed line breaks to indicate units of musical phrase; *Bog Butter* uses line breaks to guide actors through extremely speedy dialogue and notate where they self-edit or get self-conscious.

While I have not included my current prose works here, identifying the choices I am making when I have the instinct to press “enter” while writing has also helped me in my prose. Having cultivated attentiveness to line breaks as thought hitches in writing plays and operas, I find I now have a better sense of where to interject description in the midst of dialogue when writing a novel or a short story. My performance piece *bread/blood* is also prosy and conversational; there I have used that line-break instinct to identify places where I might switch performance tactics from monologue to audience interactivity. In early drafts, when I was trying to write that piece as a multi-character play rather than an interactive piece of solo live performance, I wrote lines for a Baker character that included line breaks. When I adapted those early drafts into the current script, I paid attention to where those line breaks were—often they became moments where I might turn and ask participants a question or offer an instruction, because they are breaks in the flow of thought. Like so many of these other small linguistic choices, a line break in my writing is a nod toward tension, an acknowledgement of the need to veer away from a topic or reframe or rephrase. And tension is what drives story.

In my best work, these small linguistic elements point to the fractal-like nature of my favorite kind of writing: each tiny choice about diction, silence, gesture, etc. harmonizes with the larger themes of the story, like microcosms of the wider narrative. When I'm stuck on

story structure, I can often find my way through to what happens next by returning to these little building blocks, reminding myself of those underlying values and tensions inherent in the verbal world of the piece.

### 3. To What End: Tension → Story

My first few plays in high school and college followed similar patterns: a protagonist faced off against an antagonist, usually some kind of inhuman monster, and kicked its ass. I'm oversimplifying, but zooming out with the blurry view of ten or fifteen years, I see this as a common thread among those stories. I began to break through that trope when I had opportunities to hear actors talking about playing those roles. "What's my objective?" the monster would ask, and I would have no answer other than, "Um, be evil? Like, maybe slither more?"

Just to be clear, I think bad guys are great. I love a good villain. I even find stock characters or characters with less traditional objectives delightful. My story brain was weaned on fairytales, and I constantly return to known shared stories. But when I turned real scrutiny on what I was writing, I wasn't writing fairytales. I was writing static situations of good versus evil, stretched out into full-length form. Unsurprisingly, these couldn't hold the weight of brilliant performers and directors working under the assumption that both parties to any conflict have a whole, developed self-narrative about why they are in the right or their needs are top priority.

In that earlier work, I was creating protagonists and antagonists that shared the same basic language. Their patterns of speech were similar; they waxed poetic and cruel in the same vocabulary. This meant they were speaking from the same underlying gut instincts and values—but one of them was making good choices with which it was easy to empathize, and the other as making mean, bad, monstrous choices. When I had opportunities to listen to

actors trying to motivate their choices onstage, I learned that the connection between what motivated my characters and what actions they took was often either brittle and thin or inscrutably complicated.

My work shifted as I found I wanted to answer that monster's question more usefully. What if my "bad guys" had their own deeply motivated impulses, understandable reasons why they believed they were in the right? So many of the conflicts in my own life boil down to vocabulary differences: people trying to say similar things but not sharing the right vocabulary to transcend frustration or prejudice or pain. Just as my own words and silences in daily life are the tip of an iceberg, so too for my characters. If *I* choose to interrupt or be silent based on a whole slew of familial expectations and histories, so too for my monsters.

Through my collaborative processes of production over the past few years, I have discovered that the nitty-gritty details of language contain within themselves the deepest values and impulses held by the character speaking that language. A lot of what I do as a storyteller is build or amplify resonance between the details of language and the larger structure of that language's world and the stories it holds. This process of discovery has been mostly subconscious. In the same way that my characters usually speak and gesture and pause without thinking too much about those choices, I used to draw story from language without thinking too much about how and why. The work of articulating the "etymology" of how I derive stories has a lot to do with cultivating trust in my own artistic impulses: I have to do the thing in order to then be able to describe it. Only in revision and reflection have I noticed patterns. Here, I'll describe the basics of how I use language to create a world and



its stories, and then I'll take you through some case studies of how these concepts have played out in generating and revising some of the pieces I've written in the last three years.

## **DERIVING STORY & WORLD FROM TENSION**

I'm a writer who usually hears a phrase or sees an image or chats with a character in my mind long before understanding the plot of what I'm writing. I often feel inauthentic or stuck trying to manufacture objectives and obstacles from what feels like thin air; I don't know what this character wants, I just know how they talk! They can talk a lot! Look at all this lyrical wordiness I've written! And that's where I get stuck. Story structure—by which I mean most basically the arrangement of tensions so that we wonder what will happen next, the sequence of events in time so that we don't feel bored or confused—is the part of writing that intimidates me the most.

I never know what should happen next. I often lean on premade structures, especially as I try initially to conquer a terrifying blank page. I'll use a fairytale, a historical story, a hero's journey, a religious ritual. Most of these structures boil down to characters starting out as far away from their desired goal as possible, and slogging through some really tough stuff to get to that goal.

The hard part is figuring out what's driving my characters toward their goals. It has been a bit of a revelation to articulate the link between how I hear a new character speak and what's motivating this person I've just met on the street of my imagination. It turns out that language plays a huge part in how I land on a desired goal to fuel a new story, and how I then discover all the particular tough stuff through which I'm going to ask these particular

characters to slog. The first step of this process involves squeezing the idiosyncrasies of a character's diction or rhythms of speech to find what's causing those tiny, constant choices. Come sit at my grandmother's Seder table again, or at my in-laws' Thanksgiving table. Now press on *why* people there are silent or boisterous, *why* we choose the words we choose. Before I can even begin to find concrete goals for my characters, I need to know about the collection of instincts, values, and impulses that are driving their choices, consciously or unconsciously. Before I learn *what* they want, I need to know *how* they want.

In my generative process, language is often what yields that collection of motivators. This includes the values a character holds, and also goes deeper into their instincts learned from family, trauma, nature, nurture. It is the personal filter through which each one of a character's impulses passes, the lens through which they see the world. The excavation of these motivators helps me understand a character's underlying assumptions and gut reactions: from unstudied impulses come their habits and their ways of speaking, their ways of understanding others, their desires and their comfort zones. Language (and all its component parts that I discussed in Chapter 3) betrays underlying, often subconscious instincts. Embedded in linguistic details lie a character's deepest needs and fears.

By investigating their language, I can understand *how* my character wants, and I can also begin to connive *what* they want. Since I'm a sucker for hope and happy endings, my path toward story becomes clearer. If I know the gift I want to give my characters by the end, then I know I want to start as far away from that goal as possible, so that the journey is challenging and satisfying. That means I must ask what would challenge that character's assumptions and comfort zones the most. What's their worst nightmare of a social situation?

With whom might they be most dismayed to interact? If a collection of motivators acts as a spark, what kind of kindling do I need to place around that spark to create a wildfire? What surprising circumstances would make them cry out when they are most comfortable being silent, or vice versa?

In other words, I take the knowledge that language grants me about what a character wants, and use it to craft narrative. This is most often how I generate story (what happens from the character's point of view), which I then arrange into plot (what happens from an audience's point of view) in all sorts of different ways, depending on the piece. The story might be a linear journey from wanting to getting, but the play about that story might present the wanting and the getting all out of order, or over and over, or in a spiral rather than a line.

How this motivating impulse leads to tension in the works appended here:

Play/Opera	Motivating Impulse	What will most challenge that impulse and create tension
<i>Bog Butter</i>	A cultivates a self-protective emotional exoskeleton, while B is super needy, constantly poking to connect.	Force A to encounter things that peel away that emotional shell and get inside. Let B experience being shut out.
<i>Webbed Hands</i>	Shashi and Nat both just want to belong.	Heighten the stakes of belonging in their human world by amplifying economic and social pressures; bring to life the elemental forces that pull them out of the "norm."
<i>Good Country</i>	Charley and the Barmaid both have weighty secrets they are carrying and wish they could share.	Make it deeply dangerous to share those secrets, but also make it much more urgent even than physical safety.

The key here, and what makes this different from my early monster-y good-versus-evil plays, is that the characters on the other side of that terrible social situation each have their own whole collection of motivators. I see my characters caught in a constellation of tensions, lines of need that stretch between every person in a story and even into their very environments. While in my personal life I might use my attentiveness to language to make choices that lead to an agreeably quiet Thanksgiving meal or a boisterous Seder, my characters might make choices that needle each other, that scramble for high status, that lean into those tensions and reveal conflict. As our professor Steven Dietz says, good plays take place on a character's worst day, and nobody is in someone else's story.

In revision I also work some of these questions backward to ensure that a piece's words are outgrowths of the story and precise containers for the story's tensions. If everyone in the story speaks the same language, it means they all share the same motivating drive, which means tension and conflict come out flat. I must become adept at learning the mother tongue of the monster.

Zooming out from individual characters, I've also found this way of looking at motivation useful for building whole fictional worlds. My stories happen in environmental manifestations of that constellation of tensions. Place is central in many of the pieces I make. If the first thing I find is how a character speaks, almost immediately after that I begin to see characters in their environments.

The specifics of how each world is a manifestation of the story tensions it contains look different in each of the pieces appended here. For *Bog Butter*, the environment is a character of its own. The Bog ferments the human characters' language, creating a living

container and taking on aspects of the mothers with whom each daughter in the play is struggling. *Webbed Hands* is a story where the primary tension is between those who fit into boxes and those who live somewhere between, so I set it primarily on the beach, right between the elements of Sea and Land that push and pull our characters out of their village's expectations of proper, normal behavior. I didn't invent a fictional world for *Good Country* (other than the obviously fantastical world of opera itself) because I didn't need to; our real world (especially historically in the late 1800s) is already a scary and tense enough place in which to make characters navigate intimate partner violence, miscarriage, and gender transition. Instead of creating a new (fictional, fantastical) world, my writerly work became amplifying the tensions in our real (if historical) world, choosing words that whipped through the air for conflict or syllables that soothed for the story's surprising moments of tenderness. I also worked to educate myself in the particular language of the Gold Rush, making diction choices that rooted us in that real place and time.

## **CASE STUDIES**

My work as a storyteller is to create worlds and characters that are born of words. The details of that creative process vary. What follow are some examples of how this link between language, story, and world has worked as a craft tool for me.

### ***Webbed Hands***

*Webbed Hands* began as a ten-minute play, which was basically an early version of what's currently the first half of Scene Four: a father tells his daughter that her mother was a sea creature; we think the girl might be launched into a quest to find her long-gone mother,

but instead she chooses to stay. Writing the first full-length draft, I had a really difficult time figuring out an engaging story for a piece that I found first through that relatively self-contained, environmental scene. A longer version of that story could snake out from that starting point in so many directions; as is my custom when I'm faced with too many options, I froze and felt stuck.

The turning point came when I found that Shashi's diction was an uncomfortable combination of her village's clunky Germanic colloquialism and an impulse toward more "watery" poetry. This pointed me toward a story about her confronting her discomfort with in-betweenness. What her character is reaching toward is peace with her identity as halfway between Sea and Land. I identified the driving tension of the play: uncomfortable in-betweenness. It was no longer enough for her to confront that in-betweenness in her home with her father; now I knew she would have to confront how she didn't fit into her village. I would have to escalate the problem until that tension caused something new in her life.

I derived from that tension around in-betweenness what Shashi's happy ending might be. She most deeply wants to find a situation where she can be fully herself. Initially, I explored this as a quest to find an environment that brought together all of who Shashi was, and I learned that the play probably ended on the beach, halfway between sea and land. But how lonely and awful, what a tragedy if the solution to not fitting in is to be alone! So I took as a prompt to write some scenes about the other freakyweird inbetweeners in Shashi's world, and there I found Nat. It was a sweet and lovely moment when my colleague IB Hopkins pointed out in our professor Liz Engelman's "writing gym" workshop that perhaps for Shashi and Nat home wasn't a place, but rather other freakyweird inbetweeners. Further

notes from Liz and my peers based on that conversation helped encourage me as I worked out a story that led Shashi and Nat to find belonging not with the communities that didn't quite fit, but in fitting strangely, together.

Using language to find tension to find story doesn't stop after I've developed an initial structure for a piece. These considerations also inform revision. The current draft appended here takes forty pages to get to the point where the character's flowery language crystalizes into conflict. In the next draft I'm looking toward getting there faster. I'm scrutinizing every extraneous word, striving to move quickly from super-human elemental tensions and microscopic language tensions to individual human stories.

### ***Bog Butter***

In my initial draft of *Bog Butter*, I wrote all three of the play's timescapes with the same diction. A and B spoke much the same way as Future Daughter and Past Daughter; the Bog had lines that were deconstructions ("fermentations") of the humans' language. As I do in many of my first drafts, I found that I'd written a sort of meditation on place, rather than a story. Nothing happened. When we discussed this, my professor Kirk Lynn offered me a provocation to try leaning hard into the verbal differences between the three worlds: more ornamentation in the present, more old-timey Irish diction in the past, and more robotic computer speech in the future. I was worried that would generate some really hokey, terrible dialogue. But, telling myself I could always throw it out, I decided to try writing that version of the play.

It was that exercise that led me to find tensions and story arcs in all three worlds. For example, I found in *Future Daughter* an obsessiveness about classifying emotion that led me straight into her current storyline. She's a lab study animal who's been taught to make her behavior easily parse-able into her robotic Mother's spreadsheets. The tension for *Future Daughter* was between her trained, learned diction and her natural impulse to describe her experiences organically. Her story became about resolving that tension—to what lengths must she go to be respected as a person, not a project? I took that question as a writing prompt, and it helped me fuel the scene where *Future Daughter* kills her mother.

### ***Good Country***

*Future Daughter* in *Bog Butter* is driven by the tension between her learned robotic language and the language that bubbles up organically from her human throat. But there's also another level of linguistic tension at play, which is the tension between her way of speaking and our expectations as a present-day human audience about how emotion is described. This tension comes up even more in *Good Country*, where characters speak in an old-timey Western drawl that constantly draws attention to itself. Their word choices fit around chewing tobacco and the pleasurable stereotypes of the old American West. What I accomplish with this choice is a sort of stealth cover for the characters' deep conversations about ally-ship, loneliness, reproductive rights, and the criminalization of marginalized identity.

Crafting fictional worlds that operate using unfamiliar diction makes it possible for me to use language as a Trojan horse for basic, emotional truths. If I put the climactic arias that Charley and the Barmaid sing in familiar terms to our contemporary ear, their words



might sound cliché. If I use the words we're used to as a politically engaged, contemporary audience, it might be easy to tune them out or resist them as known, even didactic, quantities. For example, in the Barmaid's aria toward the end of the opera, she sings, "Way I see it, all that proper means / is you let the hardest hand or the loudest holler / swindle the rest. / If most folks out there are too damned proper to understand, / in here you're all right." She doesn't use any contemporary buzzwords—"safe space" or "privilege" or "dominant culture" or "queerness"—though we as a creative team discussed the aria using those words. Dressing up these moments of emotional, raw truth in strange language and having my characters talk about very contemporary concerns in the language of the 19th Century (while singing) defamiliarized their conversations. This sort of language play offered me a way to circumnavigate some of the transphobic or sexist assumptions audiences might unconsciously or consciously hold. I can use that friction between an audience's familiar linguistic world and the fictional one to break down barriers an audience might have to the message of the opera.

### **MATCHING WORLD TO MEDIUM**

My stories grow out of and constantly return to the words that are their most basic building blocks. This means the qualities of the language that drive each individual story also tell me about which medium I should use to write that story. In other words, the content has something to say about the form.

For example, *Bog Butter* and *Webbed Hands* are both stories whose characters mostly need to speak aloud. The inner worlds of the young women in *Bog Butter* are strikingly

similar; it's their outer differences that escalate the drama of the play (most of the characters are outgrowths of A's imagination. The conflict in the play is about how A resists connecting with her mother and sister). *Webbed Hands*' dialogue is a performance of belonging and not belonging to groups; it must be spoken aloud in order for that cliquy-ness to manifest. *Good Country*'s diction is similarly a performance of status and gender, but there the language orbits around hiding and revealing personal secrets. That emphasis on inner truths coming out demands arias, and much of the drama in this world is about scoring silence: it must be an opera. As a play it would feel horribly on-the-nose, and the climactic monologues would fly by rather than landing as the songs they are.

Conversely, I began working this last fall on a retelling of a Brothers Grimm story wherein a girl must remain silent while doing all sorts of impossible tasks to save her brothers. The language that I heard for this character wasn't performative or even spoken aloud—it was her inner monologue, her narration of her life. To wrestle a story whose main tension lay in forced silence, I needed access to interiority. Dialogue had been terribly difficult to write, but when I switched gears and treated this story as a piece of prose fiction, I churned out most of the first draft of a novel over the course of only a couple months.

When I press on the words I'm writing and find meditation rather than movement, moment rather than story—when the words together are pleasurable but not dramatic—then I know I'm writing poetry. In that case, I do my best to put down my storytelling toolbox and pick up my poetic one. Line breaks and word choices function differently here; I focus more on sound and texture. My work is to craft an image exquisitely, as opposed to mobilizing that image.

This question of finding a story's or an image's medium isn't usually so neat as I've made it sound. Because generating story is still harder for me than generating language, whether a piece is a poem or a play or something else is often an ongoing unsureness. How might I use poetic enjambment different from line breaks in plays? How does tension, which certainly drives poetry as well as story, work differently here? What might it feel like to adapt one of my plays into a novel—would it even work? I often hear feedback about how “cinematic” my stage directions are—does that mean I should be writing more for TV and film? How form relates to content is a locus of live questions that I will be taking forward into my post-grad-school craft practice.

#### 4. Impact: Story → Reality

I've tracked how my lived experiences sparked my attentiveness to language, and how words give me clues about their speaker's values and assumptions. These generate tension, which I use to hone story structure. I can look at a fictional world and work my way into its nitty-gritty linguistic choices to discover what that world values. Or, looking from a different angle, I can start in a fictional story and ask how that world enacts its values in our real world. For me, this is the story of the story—the ways in which fiction impacts the nonfictional lives that encounter it.

This corner of my artistic cycle asks questions about who's getting paid and how much, how the story is being delivered to its audience, whose voices get heard in the collaborative process, etc. Through scrutiny and empathy, this is the dialogue between fiction and the real world. If a story can exist solely on my computer and in my head, this part of my chart asks about how that story should get out and reach other people, and how other people's feedback can help the story grow. I might approach this part of the cycle again and again from different angles. I find it's useful to think about the story of the story very early, as I frame requests for feedback in a workshop or reading. Knowing the work I want a play to do in the world helps me figure out how to ask insightful questions about whether a draft is doing that work. Asking these meta questions helps me figure out how to solicit inquiry and response that will challenge this particular work rigorously and specifically.

It's also useful to think from this perspective when I negotiate a contract or cast a production or read a review or submit something to a producing organization. For example, in early conversation with Khristían Mendez Aguirre, who directed *Bog Butter* in UTNT (UT

New Theatre) this spring, we both latched onto the play's big questions about ecology and climate change. This helped us articulate a shared value for sustainability that informed many of our design choices and even our lobby display, which used all recycled materials.

This part of the process also begs questions about form and content: how might the content of the story impact and inform the channels through which it flows into the world? Thinking about the story of the story involves reading across the chart I outlined early in this thesis. How do the priorities and values of the fictional world match up with real-world decisions? What do I want the story to say or do in the world? What is it actually accomplishing?

One example of a moment where the content of a story has impacted my actions around that story's life in the real world was our casting process for *Good Country* in UT's Cohen New Works Festival in 2019. As this is an opera about gendered and racial discrimination, Keith and I agreed early on that we felt strongly about paying both lead singers equally (one role was for a transmasculine tenor, the other for a female soprano of color). We also agreed that because of the way the story centers on a trans man's identity, we would not want that role cast with a performer who was cisgender. Starting with those values, which tie directly to the core of the story we were crafting, we worked hard to connect with the trans opera community and raise enough money that we could afford to pay performers equally. We eventually ended up casting a singer in the lead role of Charley who had to come all the way from Germany, so we shifted our budget to offer him an additional travel stipend; for an academic workshop I was proud of how well we were able to match our practical producing decisions to the opera's central values.

Another way I work across sections on this “words into worlds” process chart involves the interplay of the written work with voices of critique and feedback. As we spoke to members of the trans opera community and invited their scrutiny into our process, Keith and I heard over and over again a plea for flexibility when it came to the vocal range of the singer who would portray Charley, a trans man. Some singers who resonated with the role had used Hormone Replacement Therapy in their transitions, and were now tenors or baritones (after having been assigned female at birth). Some hadn’t used hormones, and were still mezzos, or singing countertenor repertoire. In response to this diversity of range, we decided to craft the role of Charley with ossia (“alternative” options, essentially writing two scores for the opera: one for a tenor in the role, and one for a contralto/mezzo. Exact pitch (the most common signifier of gender and dramatic type in opera) mattered less to us here than the identity of the singer cast in that role, and so I worked to embed gender and type into other linguistic elements like diction, silence, and physicality.

## CONCLUSION

As I stand at my chart’s porous dotted line between fiction and reality, I also find the stories I write looking back at me, asking questions of my own life choices and attitudes. How might scrutiny of the ways this fictional world enacts its values help spark reflection on how *I* enact my values in the real world? How do I or don’t I align with my worlds’ values? How might I enact my values more effectively? My reality sparked attentiveness, which in turn sparks story. I want to always invite those stories to spark a shift in my reality. What

began as a linear question (how might my learned hyper-vigilance about communication be useful as a craft tool?) bends back on itself to become a cycle.

I built a deeper, more consistent habit of calling my little sister out of what I learned from the production process for *Bog Butter*. That play delves pretty unrelentingly into some struggles very similar to those we've had with our own mother around illness and faith. I couldn't come away from staring into that fictional sisterly conflict and comradeship without renewed commitment to connecting with my real sister.

The more clearly I've discovered in-betweenness as a driving force in *Webbed Hands*, the more I've been able to name how I value cultivating communities of freakyweird inbetweeners in my own life. Watching Shashi and Nat find a sense of belonging together makes me grateful for my own sense of belonging with my spouse and close friends and chosen family, the way I've found people who can feel at home together in our in-betweenness. The more I root for Shashi—uniquely equipped as an inbetweeners to save her village from the Sea's destructive force—the more I believe that straddling worlds is a superpower.

I suspect my fascination with words has another root besides the traumas and tastes that have made me a lover of language, a root that goes back to some of the first texts I ever encountered. As an observant Jew, a lover of midrash and sacred textual tradition, I was weaned on the idea that words have power to create, and power to destroy. The biblical story of creation (which happened to be my bat mitzvah Torah portion) says the world was created through words, and then humanity was created in the image of their Speaker. Stories, for me, are part of what makes me human, part of what reminds me to tell and be told, read

and be read, speak and be spoken in the image of the divine. I treasure these systems of rigorous and constant questioning to make my work the best it can be, and so too I treasure the ways my work turns and questions me.

In my last semester of grad school, I've set for myself the goal to integrate this "first love" of Torah and Jewish tradition with my writing more deeply. Within the structures of my assignments in workshop with Annie Baker, I've started three or four new baby plays, all of which orbit around Jewishness in some way. I'm leaving school full of live questions about how to make art at the intersection between the textual traditions I love. I came into grad school afraid I'd have to break Shabbat or compromise my Jewishness for love of theater (or my rigor as an artist for love of Jewish obligation). Instead I find the two propelling each other, in constantly new ways, which prompts me to wonder what other assumptions and fears might I invite into my writing practice as new superpowers?

As I reflect on the past three years, I'm also struck by how much more I trust myself to write, now that I not only possess these tools but know I possess them. One of the best parts of that new confidence is that I now find joy in questioning my work and myself. I know I can fall back on solid foundational craft tools, and so I can risk more. It's possible to feel peaceful while looking wide-eyed into the shocking power of words.



## **APPENDIX: THE PIECES REFERENCED**

# Webbed Hands

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by

Cecelia Anne Raker

draft in progress 2019

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## CHARACTERS

SHASHI	A 13-year old girl, rough dress, wild hair, clumsy feet.
DOB	A middle-aged fisherman, cracked skin, weathered like a ship.
TRIS	A pretty, normal 13-year-old girl.
NAT	A 13-year-old boy, dirty hands.
MELLY & GRED	Local village kids, 12-13 years old.
SEA	A chorus of fish and waves and voices.
LAND	A chorus of dirt and trees and people.

## CASTING NOTES

There are four individual characters and two choruses in this piece (MELLY and GRED may be chorus members).

This world, like our world, is mostly made up of people who don't have white skin. There are folks of all body types and gender presentations in this world. These realities must be reflected in the casting of this play.

Probably the chorus members should be able to move well, to create choreography magic with their bodies. Maybe you make the choruses part dance corps and part actors and part sound design? Maybe you make them mostly out of animation and projection, or out of puppets? Each chorus may be as large as your production can handle; I imagine they shouldn't be smaller than three bodies each. But maybe you have a vision that's brilliant and different--let's chat.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

The choruses of Land and Sea coalesce and differentiate as needed in the world--sometimes they might individuate into townspeople or sea creatures, sometimes they are elemental monoliths.

I envision this is an opportunity for individuals in the choruses to have lines and stories, to shine individually as well as embodying the whole. Please feel free to break up and repeat and assign the text of those choruses as fits your production.

The choruses animate the magic of this world, embodying the waves and changes of place, the water and the wind. My strong preference is that this be evoked with as much simplicity and room for imagination as possible, and as few attempts to portray things cinematically as possible. Low-fi, high skill.

ONE.

The SEA crashes against the  
LAND, and the LAND hurls the  
SEA away, again and again and  
again.

Inside a little shack on the  
sea cliffs, DOB, a weathered  
fisherman, tells SHASHI a  
bedtime story by candlelight.

DOB

Once, time ago, the very Sea and the Land fell in  
love, and the children they made -

SHASHI

Gross, Da.

DOB

Their children were all the living things.

The SEA and the LAND are made  
of their creatures, tentacles  
and tubers, trees and kelp  
and fish and squirrels,  
merfolk and hillfolk.

SEA

i want you to hold me and not let go.

LAND

i want you to take me with you.

SEA

i can't.

DOB

But they quarreled, as might will happen--

LAND

you can't? you won't!

SEA

i fling myself into your arms a hundred times  
a hundred times a hundred  
over and over  
and over  
and you always push me away  
do you know that it gives me whiplash  
do you know that I ache from repeating the dance  
do you know that I want you to tell me to stay?

LAND

you rip me to shreds  
pummel what's crystal in me  
crack what's shatterable  
all this grinding down  
I am softest where we meet  
where we meet  
where we meet  
not for sweetness, no, soft  
for how you have beaten out  
all my hard edges

DOB

They quarreled as lovers do, and all their  
creatures learned for quarreling too.

SEA

you think I enjoy softening you?

LAND

think I enjoy being softened?

DOB

And so it became that all things learned to be  
one or the other, Sea or Land.

SEA

I wish you would let me stay

LAND

wish you would let me be

SEA  
and then?

LAND  
i would miss you  
i would miss myself  
the way i was when you sculpted my sharp edges  
round

SEA  
over and over

DOB  
And even on further, the creatures learned must  
to be human, or bird or mushroom or fey, each  
kind only its own.

LAND  
you're in love with the deep.

DOB  
One thing or the other.

LAND  
you're in love with the moon.

SEA  
you're in love with the dry air.

LAND  
you don't know how good

SEA  
i am also there.

LAND  
i hate this story

SEA  
it belongs to you!  
all your human bards  
whose strange frayed feet  
caress your hills  
they sing the same

LAND  
over and over

SEA  
and over  
a grand romance they say, the way I come back  
begging  
and you fall asleep beneath our moon  
believing believing believing their lies

LAND  
then leave

SEA  
i can't, i can't

DOB  
One thing or the other. But there were those who  
remembered when the Sea and the Land were lovers,  
and those slithered up the waves, and they  
creepered down the sand, and they said...Fishie?

SHASHI is sleeping. DOB pats  
her hair tenderly.

DOB  
They said "good night."

He blows out the light and  
leaves. SHASHI rolls over,  
opens her eyes, and curls up  
into herself between the SEA  
and the LAND.

SHASHI  
One thing...



SEA  
or the other

LAND  
or the other

SHASHI  
Once, time ago, there were a regular normal girl  
what never felt freakyweird or gawked clumsy or  
inbetweened, sure certain no! She were sweet and  
she had sweet friends and everything she touched  
on the dirt earth turned sweet and that girl were  
me and she were just one thing, she belonged  
regular normal.

TWO.

The SEA recedes until it's  
just the sound you always  
hear when you live on the  
coast. The chorus of the LAND  
becomes the population of the  
little town, bustling to set  
up its market day, shouting  
and playing and selling and  
drinking.

A whirl of humanity, shouted  
haggling, the scent of fish  
in the air, kids playing in  
the mud. SHASHI and TRIS are  
tucked out of the bustle  
mending--Shashi fixes a net,  
and Tris tends to a cut on  
Shashi's arm. MELLY and GRED  
giggle together nearby. DOB  
watches the children  
unnoticed from his stall  
selling fish. A little ways  
away, NAT pokes at the dirt  
in a back garden, in his own  
world.

SHASHI

Ughhhh fish. Always fish, every-which-where fish.

TRIS

Rather be a fisher with your grumpy Da than dance  
with weak-eye Parp. You were the lucky one.

SHASHI

Your Ma at it again for the midsummer?  
We could steal a boat, and jars of honey for the  
waves, and-

TRIS

Quit the kid stories.

If I were dancing at midsummer, I were almost to getting married and that means getting ready for bed.

A fit of giggles from them  
both. Gross!

TRIS

It were my ma sewing up my dress, who'll sew yours, then?

SHASHI

May likely be I don't get one.

TRIS

Might were my ma could help? It were time for growing up--

SHASHI

Were right paining, that.

TRIS

I know! The pain just here, for bosoms, the--

SHASHI

The legs! How for why were there so much harder for walking?!

TRIS

I walk fine.

SHASHI

I mean, for skin growing so it were--you know, it were--

TRIS

Skin?

SHASHI

Oh, for certain sure.

May likely be I were a bitsy more gone on toward  
womanly--

TRIS

Snippet, I were a full moon older for you, I  
would know. Skin?

SHASHI

I were for joking, were all, ha!  
Hahaha!

TRIS

That weren't normal.

SHASHI

I were for joking!

TRIS

You were a strange one, freakyweird.

SHASHI

Then you were freakyweird for liking me!

MELLY and GRED overhear their  
conversation and sidle  
closer.

TRIS

Quit for hollers, you baby.

All you were needing were just to act a bit less-

-

a bit more--just walk less freaky and talk less  
weird.

And quit with jokes for skin.

MELLY

Skin?

TRIS

Were no one talking for you, Melly.

GRED

A nasty girl, that. Witchy, a bit, no?

TRIS

Shut it. We were right proper, no nothing to see.

SHASHI

Talk less weird? I weren't proper, no thank you.

I say my mind, and if you were

turning into one those proper ladies

want to look slantwise at me for having a mind,

then I could get more and more weird! I could

grabble up your ugly Parp married babies and

mash 'em with my teeth!

I could snap their spines same I snap the fish!

GRED

Ooooooh!

TRIS

Nasty motherless skin-grower.

MELLY

Skin? What skin?

TRIS

Shashi were got skin growing in nasty places,

Shash--

GRED

And how were you knowing, but for augers and  
craft? Smells witchy for me.

MELLY

witchywitchywitchywitchy

TRIS

Quit with the kid stories! I wish I were magic,  
for getting you out tangled from our hair, nasty!

GRED

heard your Ma were flying naked on a broom

MELLY

heard your Ma were howling at the moon

TRIS

Shut it! It weren't funny!

GED

heard you and your Ma were cursing the milk

MELLY

were witching rich Parp for to take you to the  
dance, were--

SHASHI

Quit now for it, can't you weren't seeing it  
weren't a funny game?

GED

Oh, want for us to think who else might do for  
cursing milk, fish-girl?

SHASHI panics and casts about  
for a scapegoat. She spies  
NAT.

SHASHI

Shut it! Not I! The freakyweird one were him over  
there!

NAT's in his garden. He's talking to  
the plants, the sweet childlike play  
that big tough boys lapse into when no  
one is looking. Except now the other  
four kids are looking, and they sneak  
over together to watch him more  
closely.

TRIS

Right true, a changeling that one!  
Were best for the priest to dunk it drowned.

MELLY

Were just a garden, right boring.

GRED  
Right boring sure certain.

MELLY  
Let's go, weren't proper to stand gawking with  
witchybits.

They trundle off. SHASHI and  
TRIS heave a sigh of relief.  
TRIS turns to leave.

SHASHI  
No, watch!

NAT presses a palm into the  
earth and picks up some dirt.  
A tendril of a plant curls up  
around his bare ankle, but he  
doesn't notice it. He glances  
around surreptitiously,  
concludes no one is watching,  
and gives the dirt a little  
kiss. It leaves some dust on  
his lips.

TRIS  
Gross!

NAT  
Who were there?

NAT twists wildly to see  
who's laughing at him, and  
trips over the overgrown  
tendrils of plant life that's  
grown up around his ankle.  
The girls emerge.

TRIS  
That were freaky.

SHASHI  
Snippet, you were the worst sneak in the world.

TRIS

He were--did you--

NAT

I were nothing!

TRIS

He were making freakyweird fey magic! I were telling! Telling fore he infectifies the whole village!

NAT

I were never!

SHASHI

Oh for silly shame. He were gardening. More use than your frilly broiders and stitches on some fancy dress. Sneaks weren't for hollering.

NAT

Yeah!

SHASHI

Don't help.

NAT

Sorry.

TRIS

Just if you were sweet on a sniveling tinkerboy weren't cause not to tell for honest. That plant were grown up round his foot while my eyes see it!

SHASHI

Oh, visions now? You so twitchy for midsummer with Parp you got to thinking for becoming a mystic?

TRIS

I were seeing it.



SHASHI

Any simple body in this town could tell you same,  
that were impossible.

TRIS

You were watching, you. Come and tell with me and  
we'd be friends.

SHASHI

And we weren't friends now?

NAT

Yeah it were impossible!

SHASHI

Hush.

NAT

I weren't nothing but normal gardening, simple  
normal.

TRIS

See, he were scared. Freaky dirt boy. There were  
worms on your lip from your lovey-kiss.

She tweaks his lip painfully,  
and he cries out.

NAT

Quit it!

TRIS

Come, Shashi.

SHASHI hesitates.

TRIS

Oh and? You were thinking to pick this skinny  
thing over your most true friend?

SHASHI

I were thinking what a cruel body you were  
sometimes.

TRIS

Fine words for making up.

SHASHI

Go tell. And I were gonna also. Tell how you were sneaking for troubles, how you were beating on a little boy, how you were such a sneaker I were seeing you snuck behind your Ma's stall, market last, for kissyfacng with Parp all blushed and straightening your second-best smock!

TRIS

Liar!

SHASHI

It were your choice.

TRIS

Fine. And your choice too, your witch of a boy here. I hope he turns you into a frog.

NAT

I weren't a witch! I were just--

SHASHI

Shut it.

NAT

Sorry.

SHASHI

Weren't you leaving all righteous?

TRIS

Fine.

SHASHI

Fine.

TRIS flounces out. SHASHI  
looks at NAT.

SHASHI

Now for you to be explaining.

NAT

Explaining what?

SHASHI

How on the dirt earth'd you get that vine all grown so quick? It were like--

NAT

I weren't I didn't it weren't no sir, musta could been some trick of light, I weren't! Liar and you were all such mean and no I weren't!

SHASHI

She were gone, you don't have to be all grumps.

NAT

I weren't!

SHASHI

All right!

NAT

I weren't fey. I were nice at you for being freakyweird but I were a normal! Sure we were tinkers not fishers, but there were tinkers in the world, even if this backward place think tinkers were different, we weren't that different, you go to the big fairs and we were all the same, you'd see! You'd see. I weren't any changeling. I belong.

SHASHI

So it were normal for a tinkeryboy to grow up plants like they were his bestyfriends?

NAT

...no.

SHASHI

So.

NAT

So nothing.

SHASHI

So maybe you'd be thinking in that tinkerspace of yours about how maybe it were good to have a friend if you were both a little freaky.

NAT

I weren't.

SHASHI

Think on it.

NAT

Think on this!

He flings a handful of dirt  
in her face and scampers off,  
and it seems to SHASHI that  
all his plants turn their  
faces on her with a glare.  
Unsettled, she makes her way  
back to the seashore.

THREE.

SHASHI stands on the bluff  
above the sea. Thunder in the  
distance. She sticks her  
tongue out at the ocean.

SHASHI

I hate them!

"Not normal," sure certain.

Not normal for how icky cruel you were! Feh!

Just wait for when you got the skin too, and see  
weren't you crawling back for sorries.

SHASHI spits into the ocean.

SHASHI

It were lonely, the hating.

SHASHI kicks the cliff  
savagely, knocking some rocks  
into the waves. A splash.  
More thunder, and it begins  
to softly rain. SHASHI sits  
down and lets the rain hit  
her. The SEA talks at her,  
and she almost understands.  
She talks at the SEA, and it  
understands perfectly.

SEA

it's lonely lonely  
beyond where you belong

SHASHI

Who were there?!

SEA

I'm lonely lonely  
for you all along

SHASHI  
Pf. Waves. Stupid.

SEA  
Shashhhhhhhhi

SHASHI  
I could swear it were  
my name then!  
Only body who were saying it nice  
in the world,  
every other body were  
shouting it  
or needling wheedling it to get what's wanting.

SEA  
Shhhhhhhhhhashhi

SHASHI  
Who the ever you were,  
I wish you'd quit playing and come on out.  
You say my name right nice. I wish it were for  
reals.  
I'd be your friend, and you come on out  
and quit trying for tricks.

SEA  
Shassssssshhhhi

SHASHI  
Lookit me, all mooning over wind.  
Da'll be laughing me for shame and he sees my  
silly face.  
Talking at the sea. What nonsense.

SEA  
Lonely--

SHASHI runs away home. The  
LAND and SEA face each other  
again as elemental forces, no  
longer people and sounds.

LAND  
stop stealing.

SEA  
it takes a thief  
to watch for thieves.

LAND  
taking taking taking

SEA  
you take what's mine all the time, you  
take my heart and dry it  
into salt for your stinking meat and burnt bread.

LAND  
you take my bottles and messages and teddy bears  
you take my glass and wood  
you take my sailors and

SEA  
you take my songs  
you take my jewels my heart my creatures  
and you give me back garbage

LAND  
you have plenty of space for garbage  
you are taking over the world.

SEA  
you are taking over what's mine  
i'll follow her home with my stormy spray

LAND  
i'll hide her away  
home, safe from you

SEA  
nothing is safe

A crash of thunder. The LAND  
and the SEA conjure a hut by  
the beach.

FOUR.

A wild thunderstorm batters the coast. We almost hear words in the wind and the waves. DOB is carving by the fire of the tiny hut. He methodically whittles wood, forming a figure we cannot see. There are hundreds of tiny carved women lining the mantle, all with net dresses or fins or seashell hair. A gust of wind whips around the hut. DOB slices at a piece of driftwood savagely.

DOB  
Hmph!

He gets up and throws the mangled wood into the fire. He paces to the little window, looks out into the rain and the wind. He sits again. He stands again and opens the door a crack, then slams it shut. He sits again.

DOB  
Hmph.

He stirs a pot of soup over the fire. He adjusts one of the tiny ladies on the mantle. He sits again.

DOB  
Feh.

SHASHI clatters in the door, steaming in the heat of the



room, soaking wet,  
breathless.

DOB

Where on the dirt earth have you been?

SHASHI

I know, I. I'm--

DOB

No wheedling.

Lookit the sun down already! And  
whispers in town, it weren't a good night for  
lollygagging,  
it were a good night for staying inside and  
pretending  
you were ever once sometime a simple good girl!

SHASHI

The sea, it talked at me. I had to  
listen.

DOB

That don't happen. Quit with the storymaking.

SHASHI

It did happen, it did! I were running  
the path from town and the waves  
were huge all up the cliffs and  
the spray got my dress and it--it were like it  
touched my face. It were like fingers, Da does  
that  
normal happen?

DOB

It don't happen at all, normal or no.  
You can go to bed with no soup for fibbing.  
Get those wet things off by the fire to dry  
first.  
Making your own kin worry standing out in a storm  
to get caressies from the rip tide. Feh.

SHASHI

But folks say

DOB

What you hear folks say, now? You be careful,  
girl.

SHASHI

Folks say you used to talk at the sea too.

DOB smacks SHASHI's head.

DOB

Quit your stories!

A moment of shocked silence.

SHASHI picks herself up.

SHASHI

Folks say you used to talk at the sea and  
that were where you met mama, coming up out of  
the ocean  
while you talked at the waves. That's what folks  
say. And  
I wanna hear the real story. So there.  
You can hit me all you wanna  
but I wanna hear it.

DOB sits and buries his face  
in his hands.

SHASHI

Da?

DOB

I'm sorry, Fishie.

SHASHI

It weren't for hurt bad, it were ok.

DOB

It do hurt, real bad. You don't--

SHASHI

I didn't mean--

DOB

I tried and for keeping you safe  
from it, but it were a real bad hurt, and  
you'd wanna know sometime I spose.

SHASHI

No, I can.

I can get outta my wet stuff and  
head up to bed. You--

DOB

Get dried off, were right sensible.

SHASHI squelches away into  
the rest of the hut to  
change. DOB can't sit still.

He goes to the ladies on the  
mantle again, goes to the  
window, returns to the  
fireplace, grabs a figure.

DOB

You quit for the talking at her.  
You leave her right alone or or  
Or I'll sure certain--

He dangles the figure over  
the fire, til it burns his  
finger, then snatches it back  
and replaces it among the  
other figures.

DOB

You quit.

He savagely ladles out bowls  
of soup. SHASHI slinks back  
in and they eat in silence  
for a while.

SHASHI

It were my sure right for knowing what mama--

DOB

It were you the tiny, and me the Da, and I were  
for deciding.

SHASHI

I weren't so tiny.

DOB

Were rightly growing, true lovely.

SHASHI

Da, quit it.

They eat in silence again.

SHASHI

You want for me to just but only have  
the rumors the meanies in the village say?  
You want for me to learn no real truth of it?

DOB

I want for keeping you safe.

SHASHI

How were a time ago faraway to make me  
less safe than my own Da?  
You know for all your mysterymongering  
it were only to make me know there were  
something big worth the knowing.

DOB

Spouse.

SHASHI

Out with it, then!

DOB

You know how mama--how she.

SHASHI

Folks say she drowned, my one-year birthday.

DOB

Your one-year birthday. Yes.

SHASHI

She slipped on the cliffs  
and fell down down down and  
now we got us.

DOB

She weren't didn't slip, Fish.

SHASHI

No, yes she--

DOB

She leaped, like  
one of those flying fishes you see  
out on the water trying to escape  
doom in a dolphin mouth, she leaped out over the  
sea.

SHASHI

What were she trying to 'scape here? We  
don't have any dolphins on dry land.

DOB

Who knows, some were saying it--  
well, no. We  
don't have to get into that bit.

SHASHI

Were it me? Were  
I the dolphin eating her up?

DOB

Not at all, fishie, not to think it ever.

SHASHI

I were crying and  
screaming like little kids do and  
I were eating her up. She just wanted the quiet  
waves  
like I sometimes want now and I were  
too loud, I were wailing too loud and  
she got wanting the alone out on the water. It  
were  
my fault.

DOB

It never. She just--she were a creature not for  
the land.

SHASHI

Like you say 'bout me.

DOB

Yes.

SHASHI

She were a creature not for the land--  
then it were ok and she went home.

DOB

Maybe so.

SHASHI

But.

DOB

Fishie, it weren't about how she left but --

SHASHI

But home were here with us. Home should  
be here. If you got a little kid.  
Home should be with that kid.  
And you got sad.

DOB

Sure did.

SHASHI  
Stupid.  
Mama were stupid and I hate her.

DOB  
Now don't you speak that way about -

SHASHI  
She were all dead and  
I don't care anyhow, even if she can hear!

The sound of the storm rises  
outside the hut. SHASHI looks  
up.

SHASHI  
Why were it talking at me so much?

DOB  
The sea--plug up your ears.

SHASHI  
I don't wanna.

DOB  
Plug 'em up!

DOB forcefully stuffs  
SHASHI's ears full of cotton.  
She struggles. The waves  
crash, louder and louder. DOB  
knocks against the mantle and  
the little wooden figures  
teeter. One falls and  
crashes. Both SHASHI and DOB  
stop.

SHASHI  
Your ladies.

They breathe.

DOB  
Damn.

SHASHI  
It weren't  
my fault. Maybe it were your fault. Maybe  
you're the dolphin.  
I hate that you keep secrets.

DOB  
I were just trying to keep you--safe.

SHASHI  
Old enough to keep myself!  
"True lovely" he were saying one breath, and  
babyfying me the next!

DOB  
I got told not to listen and  
I went and did and lookit us now.

SHASHI  
Lookit what? An old man and  
instead of a wife he got a hundred carved ladies  
and a little kid he smacks instead of tell the  
truth at.

DOB  
Please. I were trying to--

SHASHI  
Tell me what happened.

DOB  
She came up outta the sea.

SHASHI  
'Cause she were shipwrecked, and  
you rescued her. And--

DOB  
No.



SHASHI

That were what the story goes. This were  
a thing I already know, ughhhhh!

DOB

No.

SHASHI

You rescued her and

DOB

I were fishing, out in a boat,  
and the sky got deep deep grey.

SHASHI

You shoulda come on home right fast.

DOB

I know, but it were autumn  
and I'd not caught what I needed and  
I thought better risk a quick death out here  
than die slow all winter from hunger.  
I were a young and  
stupid thing.

SHASHI

Sounds smart sense for me.

DOB

I stayed out. And  
the storm rose up all quick around me  
and the waves curled their tips to kiss me and  
I lost sight of land, lost sense of which way  
were which. I  
wouldn'ta knowed which way were up  
except I could gasp at the air a few times, and  
my little boat tipped  
and I were swimming for all I had, 'cept  
I didn't know which way for going.

SHASHI

But you were ok, you're here so you were ok,  
right?

DOB

I thrashed around in those waves for  
ages, for ages and ages and then  
my legs cramped up and I couldn't thrash more,  
and the waves did the thrashing for me.  
I took one last blessed gulp of air and I went  
down to rest and I figured better this way.

SHASHI

Not to think it ever!

DOB

But then

SHASHI

But then the storm stopped and  
then you came home  
and found mama 'cause she were shipwrecked too  
and  
you two had something in common  
which makes for good friends. Good,  
that's the right way.

DOB

Then I felt her hands  
around my waist  
and I opened my eyes  
in the dark water,  
and she were holding me.

SHASHI

that weren't how it goes.

DOB

She were there  
with hair  
all soft-white like foam, holding me with fingers  
that had webs, like  
fish tails.

SHASHI

Glory, that--she musta could swim so fast! I wish  
I had--

DOB

She got my mouth up to hers and  
she kissed me with cold lips and  
I found what! I could breath.

SHASHI

Gross, Da, quit it.

DOB

I could breath for her breath  
and I never felt so safe in my life,  
and I closed my eyes.  
When I woke up there were a beautiful lady  
naked by the fire, and I all tucked in my bed,

SHASHI

Ew.

DOB

You wanna know, you gonna know, girl.

SHASHI

I wanna know but

DOB

Your mama rescued me,  
and I almost got drowned.

SHASHI

All romantic!

DOB

Yes.

SHASHI

But--she had webbed hands?

DOB

To swim with.

SHASHI

That weren't normal.

DOB

Not for us, no.

SHASHI

But for her it were?

DOB

I guess so.

SHASHI

Does that mean I were gonna?

DOB

Your feet already have. Lookit your toes, all connected.

SHASHI

Why not my hands?

DOB

...they did.

SHASHI

Is that why they're scarry?

DOB

I'm sorry, fishie, I shouldn'ta ever

SHASHI

You cut me?!

DOB

I separated your fingers, and  
you only a little one-year girly. I  
wanted my daughter to not get the  
shame your mama got in the village.  
Shame like what that  
snippet friend of yours were to spread, were  
slime like an eel, I know  
how it were sticking to the soul--

SHASHI

You cut me.

DOB

I

SHASHI

You cut me on my birthday and that were why she

DOB

Why she left.

SHASHI

'cause you made it so her daughter  
couldn't ever swim with her, fast and glorious.

DOB

And she went back into the sea.

SHASHI

Not slipped? Not--  
pushed?

DOB

Never pushed. Least not with my arms.  
In a way, yes--all I could say were she'd  
gone away, and folks started talking so I had to  
tell  
some kind of the truth.  
It were for loving you.

SHASHI

But not her.

DOB

She were so different and beautiful already.  
But you were part me, and  
I could see my bits and her bits fighting in you  
and she were so strong and wild and the  
me couldn't ever--  
I had to fight for you. To be mine as well for  
hers.

SHASHI

I hate you.

DOB throws down his spoon  
into the rough bowl. He  
stands up, menacing. But he  
just grabs his coat and  
storms out the door,  
growling.

DOB

I were for mending some nets.

The SEA and the LAND swirl  
through each other around the  
little hut as DOB stalks  
outside.

SEA

hate you

LAND

she's mine!

SEA

you have plenty of your own  
so many creatures  
little and shifty  
dank and dirty  
fungus and buzzing little wings and frayed feet  
even this galumph  
why steal mine?

LAND

you have your own too  
scaled and slimy  
why steal mine?

SEA

mine

LAND

even if she were yours  
all it takes is some fear and some loneliness  
to turn someone into a creature who fits

SEA

oh, you know all about  
fear and loneliness  
cruel, dry, cracking

LAND

i know how to keep what's mine

SHASHI creeps out to the  
porch of the hut, where DOB  
is savagely hurling around  
old broken nets in the damp  
night. She tentatively hands  
him a cup of tea.

DOB

Were poison?

SHASHI

Must for drinking to find out, then.

He downs it in one gulp, and  
sputters at its heat.

SHASHI

Were a brave man!

DOB

Rather for poisoned or burnt than hated.

A silence.

SHASHI

I guess I understand it. Why you'd cut me.

DOB

But.

SHASHI

But were that it all?

DOB

The whole spun yarn.

SHASHI

How were I for knowing you weren't  
secreting more? How were I for  
trusting your telling?!

She stamps her foot. A  
silence.

DOB

Don't rightly know.

SHASHI

But the sea talked at me. You think it were her?

DOB

Might be.

SHASHI

Were I--were I for must be going to her someday?

DOB

Were for breaking my old heart.

SHASHI

Quit it. Were she for ever coming back, then?

DOB

Were for almost same breaking the heart for joy,  
then.

SHASHI

Ughhh.

DOB

You ask, I were for answering.



SHASHI

You gonna cut my ears too?

DOB

No, fishie. You were  
big enough for hearing.

SHASHI

What were she saying?

DOB

Only you can get that.

A long silence. The waves are  
loud against the shore. DOB  
watches SHASHI.

SHASHI

I think I'll take that cotton bitsy you were  
trying to smush on me before.

DOB

Right prudent. And  
have care for where you were telling it around,  
see?

SHASHI

Ugh Da, I weren't stupid.

DOB

There were rumbles in the village  
were good to stay small and quiet. Were  
somebody sometime soon to get hurt,  
for small harvest, for early winter, for fear of  
curse.  
Stay away at that fey boy, weren't a good friend  
for now.

SHASHI

I think it were her, that Tris.

DOB

Waves and sky, weren't any for real curse, but a fear, see?

SHASHI

She were calling me freaky.

DOB

She were the daughter of a loud one.  
If she were talking right, she were running the whole village to push you off the dock forever.

SHASHI

Maybe better.

DOB

Not to say it ever, Fishie.

SHASHI

I were what makes you all outside. I were what makes them slant-look your catches even when they were the best at the market. I were what makes--  
what makes so you had a hundred tiny driftwood sweethearts and none of the real kind.

DOB

That last were my own sourness.

SHASHI

I were what makes you sour.

DOB

Now you look here.  
Fishie, you were the best bit to ever flop in my net, you were the reason I were smiling if ever I were. You were what makes me sweeter than the salt old man I'd be were it not for your twitchy face. Not to think it ever.

SHASHI

Ugh, Da. Gross.

DOB

Now quit that sad talk and get on off to bed.

SHASHI

Fine. Come in away out of the wind also you.

She tugs him inside. The SEA  
sighs.

SEA

away?

shall i take

take

take

i can take i can take away, and you can come  
away, away, away, come--

SHASHI almost turns back to  
hear, and then consciously  
stuffs the cotton deeper into  
her ears.

SEA

come away to me.

SHASHI

Stop it.

SEA

come to me.

SHASHI

I hate that you talk at me!

You wanna say something at me, say it plain!

I hate that you talk in half whispers and weird  
nothings!

I weren't for wanting to hear you!

Leave me and my Da alone!

The SEA throws a wave in  
SHASHI's face, throws a  
tantrum, throws a storm.

FIVE.

The next day, MELLY, GRED,  
and TRIS meet SHASHI on the  
path outside her hut.

GRED

I weren't for letting her walk with us to town.

TRIS

Your Da--

MELLY

Don't for speaking to the fish girl, Tris.

GRED

Elsewise we might were thinking she and that fey  
boy were infectifying you proper.

TRIS

I um I heard her Da didn't come back in dockwise  
with the others this afternoon yet, for rumors.

SHASHI

Not yet?

TRIS

But sure certain--

MELLY

Well I heard her Da pushed her Ma off a cliff.

TRIS

For sure certain no!

GRED

I were for hearing your Ma put packtail slime in  
your Da's medicine for finishing him off quicker.

SHASHI

Her ma never! That were right mean even if Tris  
were a cruel body also!

TRIS

Thanks?

SHASHI

Your Ma were a sweet healer -

MELLY

Takes a witch for knowing sweet another. But  
giggle, Tris! Were just for jokes, to call your  
Ma a witch.

GRED

Sure certain, jokes.

MELLY

But were good to show you weren't a freakyweird  
with that fish girl and her murdering fish Da,  
then.

TRIS

Sure certain.

TRIS crosses her arms.

TRIS

If it were any that were a witch here, were her  
with that hair and those toes.

SHASHI almost retorts, but  
then she vaguely hears the  
SEA and remembers her talk  
with Dob.

GRED

Those toes! Ha!

SEA

mine!

LAND  
mine, mine, mine

MELLY  
Come along, Tris-girl.

SHASHI  
Fine.

TRIS  
Fine?

SHASHI  
Fine.

The kids exit together.  
SHASHI watches them go. The  
SEA watches her. She screams  
at it.

SHASHI  
I don't want for being yours!  
Leave me be! And you give on back my Da, you  
hear?

The SEA continues to leave  
and return, leave and return.  
SHASHI ignores it so hard,  
she's definitely not watching  
it, she's playing with her  
dress and her hair and she's  
whistling. She kicks dirt  
into the waves.

SHASHI  
I were trying for being root settled here.  
You were a ficklenasty Ma anywhich how. I hate  
you.  
Not for the--Da says creature not for the land.  
For where  
then?  
Not for the water no more than the land,  
my lungs fill up and sink like any other body's.  
Not for the air,

no gooseygull feathers, no squawking.  
Think I must were some new thing. Some  
in-betweener thing, like the foam  
on the sand, not water not air not earth and  
a little of all of it.  
But if you're in-betweener then  
were that to mean you're never at home nowhere?  
Got any answers back, then?  
Gonna just slap the rock over and  
over like a bad Ma slaps a kid who cries?  
I hate how I can never meet you as you were true  
I always bring the air  
in my freakyweird little air sacs gasping I  
always bring the sky down into you holding breath  
in the deep  
you got always dirty with air from me inside.  
And then there were always you,  
trudging around this dirt earth with me too  
swimming inside me leaking my eyes into the air  
Why do you taste the same as when I cry?  
I got the same salt? I got treasure buried in  
dead ships?  
You think, ocean--you think if I dive deep below  
you think you could give me that treasure back?  
You wouldn't. I know it.  
You'd say I were too bitsy, that I'd run off with  
it and Nat the changeling tinkerboy  
who gets snakes thrown at him for being so  
strange  
and have a grand time far away from you.  
And you can't be having that, can you now?  
You keep me freakyweird with your whispers keep  
me--

Unseen, NAT has crept up  
behind SHASHI.

NAT  
It were only once.

SHASHI  
What! Creep!

She shields her eyes like  
he's going to throw more dirt  
at her.

NAT

You were being right freakyweird, talking at -

SHASHI

You hurt my eyes.

NAT

Only once they threw snakes, and it were because  
I said we went to the South and I learned for  
charming 'em.

SHASHI

And?

NAT

I pissed myself.

SHASHI

Did you go to the South?

NAT

Who you talking at, then?

SHASHI

Shut it or I knock your teeth.

NAT

My pearls, oh mercy, not my pearls!

SHASHI

Just bone, not pearl.

NAT

How you know?



SHASHI

No grit. Pearls were inside grit,  
and the oyster makes 'em shine for  
irritation. You certain got the irritation,  
but no grit.

NAT

I got plenty grit.

SHASHI

Show it.

NAT

What were you proposing?

SHASHI

I weren't proposing to you,  
little kid. Moon-dreams, that.  
Tris were right to laugh. Right maybe  
also were to call you witching,  
you ought to go home and watch out!

NAT

Been all over the world, I have, and  
not met any other body so unnatural as you.

SHASHI

I hate you too.

NAT

No, I mean, unusual, in a good way, un un  
safe. Unsafe.

SHASHI

Go die.

NAT

Special. Different.

SHASHI

You flirt like you wanna lose teeth.

NAT

I collect strange bits.

SHASHI

I weren't up for collecting.

NAT

No, I mean--I were hoping for--

SHASHI

I weren't up for friends neither.

NAT

We could right rescue that buried treasure  
and run off. I know it sounds a  
moondream, but Shashi, you--  
I were thinking you special, not odd.  
Folk here's backward,  
I see how it--and I know--I  
were alone too, I know how it were  
to be alone with everyone in the world all about  
you.  
Right smart I could  
build us a wagon, pretty curtains,  
I weren't above some lacework in the evening by  
the fire, were it to make my darling wife happy.

SHASHI hits at NAT. He  
stumbles back.

NAT

It were a joke! I weren't I were--

SHASHI

Freakyweird nasty boy! Stay away at me!

SHASHI winds up for another.  
NAT wipes his nose off and  
stares at her a moment, then  
stumbles off, glancing back.

SHASHI spits at the SEA. She  
yells.

SHASHI

I weren't yours! I were  
staying here so quit at the chatter! I were for  
staying here!  
And I weren't for any fey weird freaks, I were  
normal! I were normal, hear?

SHASHI slams her way inside  
her home. Night falls as she  
bustles around the cottage,  
fixing soup, never sitting  
down. Finally she's finished  
everything she can tidy or  
fix.

SHASHI

Da were coming back, sure certain.  
He were often out late for fish, were  
normal, no frets.

She stuffs cotton in her ears  
again and flings herself into  
a seat.

Outside, TRIS sneaks her way  
back to the cottage alone.  
MELLY and GRED call for her  
from offstage, and TRIS hides  
behind the porch as their  
voices reach the shore.

NAT, a bruise blossoming on  
his cheek, creeps up to the  
door of the cottage. He taps  
the window quietly. SHASHI  
doesn't hear. He taps a  
little louder.

NAT

Psssst!

SHASHI doesn't hear--there's  
cotton in her ears. Outside,

TRIS dodges out of NAT's  
sight.

TRIS  
Hey fey boy! Drown in the water!

The sea roars, and NAT  
finally just pounds at the  
door. SHASHI hurtles to it  
and flings it open,  
disappointed it's only NAT.

NAT  
Douse the light, they were coming! They were all  
for sneaking!

He slams the door behind him  
and hunkers down so he's not  
visible through the windows.

SHASHI  
Were a sad state when you run for refuge  
to the girl what popped your face.

NAT  
The others were far more crueller mean.  
Of all the punches, yours were the nicest.  
Full of mysteries, you were.

SHASHI  
Shove some soup in for the talking.

NAT  
Ornery, you.

SHASHI  
Got reason. Hands hurt when it storms.

NAT  
How come they were like that?

SHASHI  
Cuts is all.

NAT  
Sure.

SHASHI  
That were a fair trick  
with your green growy bits. All  
spindly up your leg like a  
loversick lady.

NAT  
If you were gonna poke that  
I can be heading right home. It weren't  
nothing, I said.

SHASHI  
It were.

NAT  
Well then you'd best not say.  
How you think it be, in the square, all  
strung up for witching?  
That were me, if you talk.

SHASHI  
I never.

NAT  
Good.

SHASHI  
Fine.

NAT  
'Cause I could talk at your freakiness sames.

SHASHI sticks her tongue out  
at him. A moment.

SHASHI  
What'll you do for real? When you'll be grown?

NAT

Most anything, I suppose. Tinker town to town,  
like Tam.

SHASHI

You don't call her Ma?

NAT

She weren't. Found me foundling.  
You worry to be freaky? I were born  
under some fey hill for sure, and  
left out to the starlight  
when my parents couldn't stop the screams.  
Or some wench got shoved 'gainst a wall.  
I weren't for anyone.

SHASHI

Some wench is what you call your Ma?

NAT

She never called me.

SHASHI

Still.

NAT

Like to have a shop. Mend  
pots and boots and such. Like to  
have a garden.  
Always liked growing bits of green.

SHASHI

Roots.

NAT

Roots.

SHASHI

If you belonged at someone. Say  
they did you wrong, hurt you, but  
they loved you still the same, were you  
one of those would love back?  
Even if it tore your guts up?  
You were, weren't you? Weak.

NAT

They wouldn't give me my shop, though.

SHASHI

Wish you'd answer.

NAT

Not for being so fey, me,  
who looks like them, even. So  
sure they'd never give you help,  
with your hair and your eyes and your feet.

SHASHI

You spy on me at bath I'll maim you.

NAT

Any dumb body can tell it.  
Toes all connected like ferns.

SHASHI tucks her feet below  
the chair self-consciously.

NAT

So if you got a one what love you, like Dob say,  
I say give back. You had best. Not  
for loving or hurting or tearing guts.  
For that he feeds you  
and you won't have any other body.  
And if I were helping, they'd  
throw me out just the same. And then  
I'd have no lace for your curtains.  
We got a few years yet 'fore we can pass as  
highwaymen.

SHASHI

You come here for kissing?

NAT

Only partly.

SHASHI

The asking kind? Or the taking kind?

NAT  
Which you want?

SHASHI  
You were a boring little kid.

NAT  
But you weren't must worry for Dob.  
He were a strong seaman, you were  
sweet to fix soup, don't be worrying.

SHASHI  
The taking.

NAT  
For reals?

SHASHI kisses him, awkwardly  
and clumsily. She stumbles  
back after a moment.

SHASHI  
Gross. Fine.

NAT  
Really, gross?

She clenches her fists, then  
bursts outside.

SHASHI  
Why weren't you here for telling me what to do?!

A wave crests the cliff,  
spraying her in the face.  
SHASHI coughs, and can't  
catch her breath. She falls  
to her knees, gasping. NAT,  
watching through the window,  
sees her fall and runs out.

NAT  
Shashi! What were--what--



SHASHI

The breath, I can't--

NAT

What'll you want, what for helps--I never--

Another wave, and the water  
swamps them. SHASHI can  
breathe a bit better after.

SHASHI

The water, it--

NAT

Must were getting you inside--

SHASHI is coughing again. As  
she turns blue, NAT panics,  
tries to pound her back. She  
raises a hand in protest, and  
he stares--there's blue-green  
webbing filling up the spaces  
between her fingers. She  
clutches at her side, tearing  
at the neck of her rough  
dress.

NAT

What on the dirt earth is--

SHASHI

please--

NAT

That weren't normal.

SHASHI

not for the--

NAT

Stop, it weren't decent--

SHASHI has clawed off her  
dress on one side of her  
torso--and underneath are  
unmistakably, somehow, gills.  
NAT is hyperventilating.  
Another wave crests the  
cliff, soaking them both.  
SHASHI goes limp with relief  
and flops into a puddle,  
gasping.

SHASHI  
I don't know, Nat, I don't know--it were so much,  
I don't know even the half.

NAT  
A witch, or a fey, freakyweird--

SHASHI  
I'll maim you later, lunk. Get me--

NAT  
Water. Fish girl, they were always for calling  
her, fish--

SHASHI  
Please.

NAT  
The priest is what I should get.

SHASHI  
No need then, I'd be dead. All that kissyfacings.  
Help me, throw me in--

She lifts her dress, just  
high enough to reveal that  
there's webbing between her  
legs now. NAT looks like he  
might run, or piss himself,  
but he pulls it together.

NAT  
What were you?

SHASHI gasps again.

NAT

It were wrong, throwing a little girl in the surf  
in a storm. But--but I believe--

SHASHI

I can't for--

NAT

I hope it weren't the murders, Shashi,  
promise me  
it weren't the murders?

SHASHI

please!

NAT lifts her over his  
shoulder to carry her to the  
edge of the bluff as the  
waves crash to meet them.

SHASHI

Thank--

NAT stumbles and gets scared.

NAT

No!

SHASHI

I'll come back--

NAT

Promise.

SHASHI

Sure certain.

And he lets her go, into the  
grasping hands of the SEA.

NAT

If you made me a murders I were right gonna hate  
you!

NAT stares out at the sea for  
a long time, soaked to the  
bone in the rain.

NAT

Murders, sure certain -  
maybe I were the nasty things they were always  
saying?

He shivers violently and  
scuttles back to the hut and  
bolts the door. The sea  
rages. Outside, sneaking a  
look around a wall, TRIS  
peeks out, white as a sheet  
and wide-eyed.

SIX.

It is a different world with  
different light underwater,  
where it feels like  
everything is flying,  
somehow. SHASHI exults in how  
she can swim fast and  
glorious, with her new body,  
with her new hands.

SEA  
welcome home  
welcome home  
welcome back to where you belong

The current dance sweeps  
SHASHI downward.

SEA  
i missed you since the Land walkers  
climbed away from me, they kept my salty blood  
but they grew legs and walked away  
and all they send home is trash  
but you, my daughter, my beloved  
you are not trash they sent back  
you did not climb out because you were broken you  
were  
cut away

SHASHI  
...ma?

Later that same night, the  
storm has subsided a bit, but  
the wind still blows strong.  
NAT peers out the window.

NAT  
You must were coming back.  
I went down the harbor for finding your Da  
And that snippet Tris girl were

talking the ears for all the docks  
that the fey boy threw her bestyfriend off the  
beach.

Your Da turned right around for docking,  
just hurled up the net of fish and  
rowed right back out the bay all haggard--

DOB is rowing his little  
skiff on the choppy night  
waves.

DOB

Shashi! Fish! Gone like her Ma before.  
You ocean! You listen! You might were taking  
yourself, but not my girl for also!

He rows furiously.

NAT peers around the doorway,  
and then sneaks outside and  
puts his bare feet on the  
ground.

NAT

Ahh, that were a bit better then.

The LAND curls its dirt  
around his toes, caressing.

LAND

under it all, i am

NAT starts and pulls his feet  
back up from the dirt.

NAT

There weren't nothing for hearing.  
Quit for being freaky, man!

LAND

remember coming from underground?

NAT pokes his toe down into  
the dirt, and the LAND peeks  
out around the hut, little  
feet, little hats, little  
brown beings and moles and  
mushroomfolk.

LAND  
remember dancing with the leaves and the elves  
and the fey?  
remember having  
roots?

NAT  
I weren't can't hear you!  
I weren't can't hear nothing weren't normal!

LAND  
remember wearing a flower for a hat?

The LAND plops a flower onto  
NAT's head. He flings it off  
in disgust.

NAT  
I hate you right proper then.  
If I were remembering.  
Then why were I not still beneath? Why  
were I with all these big nastymean folk here?  
I weren't for you! I were for here!  
So leave me for trying to be like them!

LAND  
under it all, in it all, here i am

NAT  
...who?

The LAND blooms a little  
flower for NAT, whose eyes  
widen with terror and then  
fascination.

NAT

For me, then?

LAND

always, always, always

He pats the damp ground  
awkwardly. The LAND brings  
him a whole cornucopia of its  
treasures, it makes him a bed  
of flowers.

LAND

i will keep you safe, i will hold you mine,  
mine

Far below is a castle that  
the SEA has knit out of ocean  
trash, plastic and fishlines  
and lost nets, bubbles slowly  
trickling upward from its  
windows.

From far, far above, a tiny  
fish swimming down from the  
grey shining surface,  
becoming a girl, becoming a  
girl with webbed limbs,  
becoming SHASHI.

SEA

you were cut.

SHASHI

For keeping me away from you.

SEA

mine like the fish they take like the salt they  
dry like  
everything else they steal  
stolen your tongue  
stolen your song stolen and given you  
harsh accents, wrong words--



SHASHI

What'd you expect, leaving me so tyke little?  
Who else were to teach me talking, then?

SEA

leaving?  
i leave and come back  
i leave and come back  
i leave and come back all day all the time  
only ask the rocks the tides the waves  
they know

SHASHI

Oh, coming back, then? Not what I ever saw!  
Quit with the voices from all over,  
show me your face. Or were you  
cowarding like the fraidy fish you were?  
Some Ma, for never to see.

So much hope is in SHASHI as  
she strains to find which  
body of the SEA is her  
mother.

SEA

some fish flutter nearby for weeks  
some leave once the gift of life is swimming in  
the eggs  
i can hold all their love and give it back  
forever forever forever  
i always come back to my own

SHASHI

You weren't there! You weren't  
ever there! I were  
alone of you for thirteen years! I were--  
I were--I met my first blood with no other body  
than a shamed old man to explain. I  
punched the first boy were ever nice at me  
for being confused, n' Da said  
proud when he heard.  
I got no womenfolk'll look in my eye for being  
freaky strange.

SEA

soften, you'll soften, you'll round out the edges  
they have such sharp edges to feelings up there  
soften and smile and float with the current  
not fighting the way all things flow  
you'll see, you'll see, you'll see

SHASHI

I'll not be seeing  
no other thing than my Ma to spit at her face!  
And  
then you might see how it were feeling  
to get left at!

SHASHI touches the castle,  
which entangles itself more  
tightly, slips a tentacle, a  
tendrill, a sucker around her  
wrist.

SHASHI

What! I--

SEA

daughter of the waves of the tides  
pearl of the deep

SHASHI's stuck.

SHASHI

I won't can't be able to breathe! It were  
too much weight  
of water, too deep, too--

SEA

breathe me in breathe in the taste of home

SHASHI

I weren't staying here.  
You weren't my Ma.

Up above, TRIS picks her way  
across the beach, holding a  
torch, noticing the greenery

that spills out from the  
front of Shashi's house. She  
peers around its edge and  
sees all the magic within,  
and NAT.

TRIS  
Found you!

NAT  
Shhhh!

LAND  
Husshhhhh.

NAT  
Were you needing for hiding also? Were space.

TRIS  
I were gonna kill you, witch boy.  
You were what murdered my bestyfriend!

NAT  
I never not did!  
She were for hating you so mean! She were--

TRIS  
She were for murdered like the sea took my own Da  
and you were full of nasty ick fey freakness  
doing magic  
in our town so they talk cruel nonsense  
for my Ma living all a woman alone.

NAT  
It were they, that Melly and Gred and the others!  
Not me what were for hurting you.

TRIS  
What were hurting were that they want a witch.

NAT  
I don't have what nothing to say for witching.

TRIS

Oh and? What were all the real sorcerings I can  
see here, flowers all out of season?

NAT

Were simple Shashi's garden.

TRIS

Were real witching, and were to save me and mine  
if they take you instead. You were the witch  
not my ma, not me! I were for showing it,  
I were for proving,  
it were you what were the fault for all of it,  
all of it!

She waves her torch.

TRIS

Over here! I found him!

The LAND shivers, and all the  
plants shake their leaves.

LAND

time for roots, for holding strong

The LAND wraps itself around  
NAT, bolting the door of the  
hut with new wood. TRIS is  
left outside, flummoxed.

Below, the SEA surrounds  
SHASHI, its many faces each  
kissing her cheeks, each  
caressing her arms, each  
looking into her eyes.

SEA

i am much bigger  
than one mother

SHASHI

My Ma'll be coming to set me free.

SEA

free?

set you free in the deep,  
i freed you from your broken limbs from your  
frayed legs,  
i freed you to swim deep with me i wished for you  
freed you to decide not like the sharp landfolk  
i know  
i hear my daughters' stories how no choosing is  
left to you

SHASHI

But the sea--it were  
talking at me every day! How  
were that leaving for me to choose, then?

SEA

and how would you know there was a choice  
if you never heard the possibilities?

SHASHI

Spouse.

SEA

your land crawler boat skimmer man didn't tell  
you, did he?

Far above on the night waves,  
DOB rows and rows.

DOB

Were mine for keeping as much as yours for  
taking, then!

SHASHI

He told me plenty.

SEA

so.

SHASHI

That he had gone sliced me open  
like a dead fish guts for love for love and  
then my Ma left like a no-good cowardcat!  
That she she left!

SEA

so.

SHASHI

So? Give her back at me!

SEA

gone gone gone

SHASHI

Dead?

SEA

free

Up on the beach, NAT peers  
out at TRIS through a window.

TRIS

What were you looking, fey boy?

NAT

I weren't a witch!

TRIS

I were for burning you now, for starting off a  
good right fire!

She waves her torch toward  
door. The LAND shrinks back  
from the fire.

NAT

Don't were leaving me!

LAND

the flames, the heat

TRIS

Your witchybits weren't for help against fire!

NAT

Don't weren't abandoned!

LAND

abandoned?

SHASHI underwater wrests  
herself out of the SEA's  
lullaby.

SHASHI

Free? More like say abandoned!

I don't

belong at here.

SEA

belong, it all belongs, it all returns  
everything belongs to me.

SHASHI

I hate her!

SEA

the rage, the sharp edges  
how when you have no water to spread the tension  
it gathers and gathers at the nape of your neck  
until you strike out in harm  
until you break bones and dishes and hearts  
come home away  
from all that sharp

SHASHI

My home were never with a heartbone breaker!

LAND

abandoned broken hearts and plates and bowls and  
bones

SHASHI

I bet spouse she were never even caring that I  
were cut. She were just waiting to leave, waiting  
for a scuse.

SEA  
cuts

TRIS pulls out a belt knife  
and begins to hack at the  
vine across the door.

TRIS  
Let's were making some cuts here and there, for  
taking!

She singes the door with her  
torch, kicking at it.

LAND  
like tilling the land, like whittling bark

SEA  
like gutting like bleeding into the water  
iron taste in the nostrils of the sharks  
cuts

LAND  
like cutting bread and meat for dinner

SEA  
how could he cut  
your beautiful, tiny hands?

NAT  
It weren't for murders! It were for--

TRIS  
For what then?

SHASHI  
It were for loving!



DOB's boat is tossed by  
errant waves as the SEA gets  
angrier.

SEA  
loving looks different  
on land and by sea

NAT  
For...don't laugh! For loving-like.

TRIS laughs.

LAND  
different so vastly different  
no hope for you and me

TRIS  
Ha! Loving?

SEA  
not to love is different  
from loving differently

SHASHI  
That she left, she were a monster, no Ma. I  
weren't looking for seeing Da monstrous also. At  
least he stayed.

SEA  
i remember the glow of your fingernails  
like mother of pearl i know how perfect you were.  
i can have any jewel in the world  
all i need to do is pull down another ship  
any jewel, and i have never seen such  
preciousness.

The SEA fights with DOB's  
boat.

SHASHI  
She left, why weren't you seeing how how how

TRIS  
Fairyrkid stories, that. She were never loving  
you!

NAT  
I were saving her. You were wrong.

LAND  
how wrong  
how far how alone how  
how rage how sharp yes sharp like stones like  
knives

SEA  
how free  
how simple to not stay to fly beneath the waves

SHASHI  
I don't feel free.

NAT  
I hate you!

LAND  
how it makes your salty blood boil

TRIS grabs NAT through the  
hole she has made and hauls  
him onto the beach. She ties  
his hands roughly and kicks  
him to the ground. She piles  
driftwood as kindling around  
him.

NAT  
She were for coming back!

TRIS  
Oh sure certain, dream fey witching to  
bring back dead then?

NAT  
Shashi!

SEA  
how many choices all your own

SHASHI  
I don't feel my own,  
I miss her every minute of every day,  
and she were just--it were just

NAT  
Let me free!

SEA  
how free

LAND  
how cruel

SHASHI  
it weren't what I want!

SEA  
i want i want i want to give

TRIS  
She were took by the cold sea.  
And I were giving you to the flames!

NAT  
She were living!

LAND  
to take

SEA  
to give you what you want.

TRIS  
What were you wanting, for all that murders,  
then?

NAT

I I cannot explain it, you were not for  
believing.

LAND

i know already.

SHASHI

i want a Ma.

LAND

want the shaking  
want the whole beneath torn apart want  
the power the quake the sharp the blood the dirt  
to rise up  
and choke the water

NAT

Just for waiting until she swim home!

TRIS

Freak.

NAT

Stop it, you were--

TRIS

I were for showing them.  
I were for showing how I were the one normal,  
we were normal and not for witches.  
We weren't for standing witches not here!

NAT

I weren't a witch!

The LAND sprouts new growth  
from the driftwood TRIS has  
used to tie up NAT. TRIS  
stumbles back in surprise,  
but then she lunges forward

and lights the kindling, and  
the flames lick toward NAT.

SEA  
want the wild power

SHASHI  
Yes.

LAND  
to shake, to save

SEA  
to take, to give--wait--

SHASHI  
Yes.

She stamps her foot on the  
ocean floor again. A rumbling  
in the deep. A movement, too  
low almost for us to hear,  
too dangerous.

SEA  
how wrong--the one is not separate from the other  
if you pull me, i push you, we cannot

LAND  
you lie

SEA  
if you want the shaking, you want the wave  
want to wipe that whole dirt town off the cliff  
their pinched stealing faces ground to paste in  
the sand  
drowned washed clean  
fresh and pure  
want that?

LAND  
want power, real choices,  
standing strong on your legs  
for fresh air and  
keeping your promises

SHASHI  
I hate her.

SEA  
i love you.

LAND  
love is not leaving

SHASHI  
I hate her!

The LAND takes SHASHI's pain,  
takes NAT's fear, and heaves  
the seafloor up in a gigantic  
earthquake. The SEA takes  
SHASHI's rage. It takes it  
and takes it and takes it.  
DOB's little boat swirls and  
capsizes in the shadow of the  
huge wave.

SEA  
I hate your rigid rocks.

LAND  
I hate your noisy spray.

SEA  
I hate your silly walkers.

LAND  
I hate your slithering swimmers.

SEA  
I hate--

LAND  
I hate--

The SEA hurls itself at the LAND, and tears the LAND's defenses apart. The SEA washes up into the village in its furious, giant wave. Nets and boats and market stalls collapse under the power of the ocean. Chaos as the LAND is innundated, villagers running to save their property.

In the fury of the wave, SHASHI and DOB both wash ashore. The wave puts out TRIS's fire and knocks her out, flinging her to the ground. NAT is soaked but safe in his living pile of driftwood.

SHASHI clambers up, shakes sand and water out of her tattered dress, and runs to pull at the swamped vines, letting NAT out.

SHASHI  
Freak.

NAT  
Sure certain. You were too.

SHASHI  
Sure certain.  
Where were my Da then?

DOB is left unconscious, wet in the waves.

SHASHI  
Da?

SEA  
for every leaving there is a returning.

Another wave crests the  
cliff, almost dragging DOB  
away.

SHASHI  
He won't can't be for breathing, let go!

SEA  
returning, man of the sea, man for me

SHASHI  
No! You won't can't have him! He were mine!

SEA  
come home to me--

SHASHI  
Da, wake up!

She attacks the waves, cuts  
at the kelp entwining round  
DOB.

SEA  
mine mine mine

The LAND twines a flowering  
strand around SHASHI's wrist.  
The SEA places a pearl on her  
other hand.

SEA  
stop stealing.

LAND  
stop stealing.



DOB slips further into the  
water. NAT grabs him, holding  
himself anchored by the vines  
the LAND has grown.

SHASHI  
Give him back.

LAND  
you rip me to shreds

SEA  
and you always push me away  
do you know that it gives me whiplash  
do you know that I ache from your leaks and your  
trash  
do you know that I want you to--

LAND  
to choose

SEA  
to choose

LAND  
only one

SEA  
never both

LAND  
what is dry is not

SEA  
wet is not

LAND  
dry is

SEA  
is not

SHASHI

Were my choice. But  
I weren't wanting it. I weren't  
not neither or each, I were both.

SEA

both?

LAND

both?

NAT

Sounds smart sense for me.

SHASHI

I were both. So leave be my Da.  
He were a little both too, then, if he were mine.  
I get for the deciding, it were mine.

DOB opens his eyes, coughing.  
Perhaps a woman from the SEA  
caresses his face. And then  
he sees SHASHI, bending over  
him in concern, and he sees  
his lover all over again in  
her face.

DOB

It were you.

SEA

come home to me, come home.

DOB

I were for missing you so long. Must were time  
for going home. Our girl were gone, gone like  
you, once, time ago, to where she belongs

SHASHI

Da!

DOB

I were for pining and carving your picture.  
I were wanting for going home to you.

SHASHI

I were your Fishie, Da! Home were here, with me.

His eyes focus as he coughs  
again.

DOB

She were true lovely, Fishie.

SHASHI

And I weren't?

DOB

Not to think it ever.

DOB, with great effort, hauls  
himself up on one arm. NAT  
gets a hand under his  
shoulder and helps him stand.  
They look out at the waves.

TRIS coughs and stirs, and  
DOB turns to look at her.

DOB

Best watch for that snippet.

TRIS

Shashi! You were alive!

SHASHI

Must takes more than a wave for killing a fish  
girl.

TRIS

I were sorry, sorry for saying--

SHASHI

Save your sorries, lend a hand for getting my Da  
to the fireside now.

TRIS

No. Must were running now, all you freakweirds.  
They were coming--

NAT

Who?

On the path from town, MELLY  
and GRED march toward them,  
carrying fire.

TRIS

Soon after me, that Melly and Gred and the rest.

DOB

Feh.

TRIS

They were torches and ready for burning a witch.

SHASHI

And you, then, with your Ma what gets called  
witch?

TRIS

If only! If I had power more than sniping, I'd  
glad right turn it on all their narrow faces now.  
I thought for giving them this tinkerboy what  
killed my bestyfriend -

NAT

Not never!

TRIS

But run now or sure certain you were for burning!

DOB

Our thanks for the warning, but what were to be  
done? The boat were in splinters.

SHASHI turns to NAT. He  
smiles.

SHASHI  
For giving me help, then?

SEA  
to help to hope

SHASHI touches the waves, and  
they bring her the smashed  
wood from all the huts they  
just destroyed.

NAT  
For giving your help too?

LAND  
to hold to hope

NAT touches the wood. It  
sprouts vines and leaves,  
flowers and fruit. It twines  
together living, and makes a  
boat.

SHASHI and DOB and NAT pile  
into the boat together. TRIS  
watches, open-mouthed.

SHASHI  
Were not too far from truth, that sillygossip for  
all I were witching now.

NAT  
Or I.

TRIS  
Sure certain.

The SEA tugs the little boat  
out toward the waves, but

SHASHI pauses. A mob of angry villagers, led by GRED and MELLY, come toward the beach with torches.

MELLY  
There they were!

GRED  
The witches!

SHASHI turns back to TRIS.

SHASHI  
Might were we could find a way, for giving you some that power they think you and your Ma might have.

TRIS  
How?

SHASHI  
If you were to be kind with it.

TRIS nods and grasps SHASHI's hand.

SHASHI  
Ocean! If you were wanting for friends with me, must to be friends with my bestyfriend for alsos.

And the SEA rises up all around TRIS, a menacing wave.

SHASHI  
Lift up your hand, snippet.

TRIS  
What?!

SHASHI  
Were you in charge now. You were a right good friend, to warn us free.

TRIS  
No, I were not.

SHASHI  
But now on.

TRIS  
Sure certain, for trying bests.

SHASHI turns to the SEA and  
pushes the boat out.

SHASHI  
Help her.

NAT  
Yes, for helping.

The LAND suddenly sprouts up  
greenery in the path of the  
villagers, twisting GRED and  
MELLY up in vines as the  
little boat speeds out to  
sea. TRIS squares her  
shoulders, smiles, and lifts  
up her hands like she's  
controlling the terrifying  
vines.

DOB  
Once, time ago,

NAT  
The very Sea

SHASHI  
and the Land

NAT AND SHASHI  
fell in love.

NAT and SHASHI take each  
other's hands. The LAND

blooms, the SEA sighs. TRIS  
touches the vines holding  
GRED and MELLY, and frees  
them. They look at her with  
awe.

TRIS  
And that were how I got become the witch of this  
town.

DOB  
A town what learned it were right useful having a  
good witch

TRIS  
for healing, which were right respectable and  
much more fun than midsummer dancing some rich  
Parp. Sure right useful

SHASHI  
for rain and harvest

NAT  
storm and fishing-clear seas

TRIS  
and to keep a few freakyweird in betweeners  
living in the caves around its coast.

The little boat comes to rest  
by some tidal caves, rock and  
water.

SEA  
i fling myself into your arms a hundred times  
a hundred times a hundred  
over and over  
and over

LAND  
I am softest where we meet



SEA  
i want you to hold me and not let go.

LAND  
i want you to stay.

SEA  
inside me, you are also there.

LAND  
inside me, you are.

SEA  
so.

LAND  
so.

The SEA curls itself into  
eddies in the land, tidepools  
and mud. The LAND traces  
spirals of sand into the  
waves. They breathe together.

THE END

## **Good Country**

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A Chamber Opera for Ensemble and Saloon

Libretto draft in progress as of February 2020

libretto  
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## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

**BARMAID** - Soprano. An entrepreneur, formerly a sex worker, 30s. A woman of color.

**CHARLEY** - Contralto, countertenor, tenor, or baritone. A dignified man in his 50s, assigned female at birth. Cast flexibly based on gender identity of the singer—ideally a trans man; at least a singer who identifies as nonbinary or genderqueer. Two scores are available, one with Charley as a tenor or baritone (with ossia passages for flexibility), and another with Charley as a contralto or countertenor.

**HUSBAND** - Baritone. A former miner, a hard man, 30s.

**LADY** - Soprano. A proper young lady, 16-35.

**DOCTOR** - Tenor. A medical doctor, blustery, 25-70.

## **INSTRUMENTATION**

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Cello

These comprise a "band" in the saloon, positioned onstage if possible.

**SUPERNUMERARIES** and **TECH** folks, the “staff” and patrons of the saloon.

## NOTES ON CASTING

### **Please consider historical data and race:**

- Charley Parkhurst was white.
- Sex workers and woman restaurant-owners like the Barmaid were historically mostly Chinese, South American, White, or Native American in California during this time period. There is less documentation of other women of color in those roles.
- Miners like the Husband were Chinese, Latino, or White; less frequently Black or Native American.
- Medical doctors during the California Gold Rush were almost all White or Chinese.

### **Please consider intersectionality:**

California during this time period was populated by a wild amalgam of prospectors and immigrants from all over the US, South America, China, Europe. Many different racial combinations can work.

Please engage the nuances of color-conscious casting: racism was and is alive and well, and intersecting identities will lend different connotations to the story (for example, consider what it is to put an abusive man onstage and then kill him if he is cast as a person of color, what you'd like to do to mitigate the harmful stereotypes that reinforces, etc). We've written alternate lyrics and music to make casting singers of color and singers familiar with the experiences of not being cisgender as feasible as possible.

Please hire folks familiar with trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer experiences in roles beyond the cast. We ask that you engage with us in the work of building an equitable artistic community at every level as you hire the cast and staff of this opera.

We are committed to helping make sure that any production has trans folks and people of color involved beyond just the performers playing Charley and the Barmaid.

## SETTING

A saloon in California during the Gold Rush. We are initially and finally in 1879, with the bulk of the opera being a flashback to 1861. This opera may be performed in a bar, with the audience immersed in the action, or in an intimate traditional opera venue.

## Act I

*A grungy saloon in northern California, January 1880. A BARMAID wears a clean apron and stands behind the bar, ready for an evening of customers. In a moment of quiet before the rush, she flips open a newspaper and reads parts of the article aloud.*

BARMAID

“...hardly a city or town or hamlet  
of the Pacific coast...  
where at least one person cannot be found  
who will remember Charley Parkhurst...  
...one of the most dextrous and... celebrated of the California drivers...”  
...an honor to be strived for to occupy the spare end of the driver’s seat  
when the fearless Charley Parkhurst held the reins of a four or six in hand...  
“..turned his wild mustangs and his wicked revolver loose,  
and brought everything through safe...”

*BARMAID takes the paper to a table and sits. She continues reading.*

“Last Sunday, in a little cabin on the Moss Ranch,  
about six miles from Watsonville, Charley Parkhurst,  
the famous coachman,  
the fearless fighter, the industrious farmer,  
died of the cancer on his tongue.  
He knew that death was approaching,  
but he did not relax the reticence of his later years--”  
“Then, when the hands of the kind friends...  
came to lay out the dead body...a discovery was made  
that was literally astounding...”  
Astounding...  
“That a young woman--”

*BARMAID throws the paper down in disgust.*

BARMAID

Reticence. Is that what they call it? When you never come around again  
to see somebody who would have been your friend?

*CHARLEY enters, a ghost, and leans on the bar. BARMAID does not see him, but she shivers.*

CHARLEY

Always did say  
Kick the bucket one of these days,  
and that's the last of old Charley.  
Papers keep yammering  
how folks knew all along—  
I never told a soul out West.  
Except for you that night in 1861.  
Chawed more tobacker'n ordinary for months after.  
You never did speak up.

BARMAID

Kept hoping I'd look over and see you leaning there again.

CHARLEY

Ever wonder what your life might have been  
a hundred years from now, two hundred?  
Wonder what mine would be, then.

BARMAID

Damn papers, yammering.

*BARMAID gets up, throws the paper behind the bar, and starts scrubbing  
glasses furiously.*

CHARLEY

Never told a soul.  
Except for you that night in 1861.

BARMAID

You are who you are.  
I know the truth.

*CHARLEY tips his hat and disappears. She doesn't notice; she's  
remembering, and it takes us back to the autumn of 1861 in the early  
evening--a dirtier, harsher saloon back then. A clattering comes from the  
kitchen, and then out comes the Barmaid's HUSBAND. The saloon is  
empty still.*

HUSBAND

What'd you say to me?

BARMAID

I know the truth.

HUSBAND

How're you so certain? I suspect—

BARMAID

The child is yours.

HUSBAND

Ain't a reason to tell me how I use my money.

BARMAID

With a baby coming,  
we oughta be prudent is all.

HUSBAND

If dollars and cents are that tight—  
You're playing the painted cat already.  
I see how you're looking at other men.  
When my purse was large, in the old days, before I saved you  
You only ever flirted that way with me.  
If dollars and cents are that tight--  
Once a sporting lady, always a soiled dove.  
You should charge, like the old days, before I saved you.  
Seeing as how you haven't changed your ways.

BARMAID

You never saved me.  
I remember you, lost and scared  
Under the bluster of your miner's wear  
I dug for gold same as you, all told

HUSBAND

Faithful only as long as I was rich—

BARMAID

Gold at your heart, and I'm sure it's still there.  
I thought, "Here's a real man, an equal partner--"

HUSBAND

Equal?! Me? To a sporting woman?

BARMAID

Ever since your mud didn't pan out and you got to skulking around here  
You are catawomptiously unfriendly.  
I would not mind it a mite if you were to get yourself a real job again.

HUSBAND

I work here!

And a real man don't allow his woman to manage his enterprise.

BARMAID

I was feeding people here *before* you quit digging.

And I earn more than your dirt ever did.

*He raises his hand to strike her. She flinches.*

BARMAID

Take what you want from the box.

*He does, laughing. She straightens and studies him.*

BARMAID

You look tired—

HUSBAND

And your face looks like a dime's worth of buzzard meat!

I can't for my eyes remember

how you hornswoggled me into marriage,

but I can sure raise my belt

if you don't quit telling me how to run this business—

*He swallows his curses as a whole stagecoach worth of passengers pile through the door. Among them are a DOCTOR, pale and sweating, and a LADY, exhilarated.*

DOCTOR

Hurry it up, girl! As a doctor of medicine,

I prescribe a general treatment of stiff drinks

For every rattled body in our coach.

BARMAID

You got it, Doc. What's the occasion?

LADY

Survival!

Oh, he saved us all!

BARMAID

Who now?



LADY  
A hero!

DOCTOR  
The greatest stagecoach driver in all of history!

LADY  
A deed of daring!

DOCTOR  
Courage!

LADY  
Chivalry!

DOCTOR  
Gumption!

*CHARLEY, the stagecoach driver, ambles in through the front door, removing his hat. He's a middle-age man with a patch over one eye. BARMAID hastily straightens her apron.*

HUSBAND  
Old One-Eye, with Wells Fargo?  
That's the kind of real man you want?  
Horse kicked in his eye, but at least he's somebody's employee!

CHARLEY  
Someone's got his dander up.

BARMAID  
Well if it ain't our Charley, best whip in the west.

DOCTOR  
To Master Parkhust, hip-hip-hooray!

*The room begins to fill up with the night's patrons. HUSBAND is in and out of the kitchen, serving tables and watching the others. More customers are filled out in our imaginations as lights come up to reveal the audience at tables in the bar.*

LADY  
Hooray!

BARMAID  
Do tell?

CHARLEY  
Just another dead bandit today.

HUSBAND  
Don't see the fuss.

DOCTOR  
Sugarfoot himself.

BARMAID  
No!

CHARLEY  
Damn right.

LADY  
I just wanted an adventure.

HUSBAND  
Ha! Sugarfoot's nothing.

CHARLEY  
Tell that to all the drivers and coaches he's robbed blind.

BARMAID  
I want the whole tale straight!

LADY  
The horror!  
No better way from San Jose to Santa Cruz,  
they said.  
Perfectly safe, most of the time,  
they said.

HUSBAND  
Ain't never heard nobody say the West were perfectly safe.

LADY

Here we come up a rise,  
horses huffing, gee up, gee up—  
When suddenly! surrounded by bandits!

DOCTOR

Guns drawn!

CHARLEY

Got the name of Sugarfoot for the burlap in his boot.  
Heard he got the toes froze off one winter night.

*LADY grabs DOCTOR and wraps a hanky round one of his feet. Doc  
waves an empty bottle as a gun.*

LADY

Stomp Stomp, waving his persuader  
so close you can see the pearl inlaid,  
Stomp, Stomp, and he hollers:

DOCTOR

"Throw down the gold box!"

LADY

I'll hear it in my dreams forever!

DOCTOR

Throw down the gold box!

LADY

Should have listened, should have never,  
Mother told me to read a novel,  
but I insisted on travel.

ALL

Throw down the gold box!

LADY

Wanted more than pampered parties, laughter, dresses  
Wanted adventure somewhere marvelous--  
so I insisted on travel.

ALL

Throw down the gold box!

LADY

Should have listened, Father told me  
real life isn't one of my novels,  
but I insisted on travel.  
What possessed me to come out here?!

ALL

Throw down the gold box!

LADY

Bandits growling, heart is pounding  
I'm fainting, I'm fainting!

*DOCTOR catches her, and she swats at him—it's just a retelling, after all.*

LADY

—when CRACK goes Master Parkhurst's whip!  
Off we gallop, to outrun the ruckus—

*LADY gallops around the bar, bowling straight through the tipsy Doctor,  
who stumbles into a table and knocks it over, a whole reenacted mess.*

LADY

--but bandits carry shotguns, and their aim is true.  
So up stood our driver, despite the speed,  
six-shooter blazing 'til they were dead in the dirt!

DOCTOR

He saved our lives and saved the box!

LADY

He shot down those outlaws like bottles off a fence!

*(A moment of exhilarated silence)*

Not that I've ever seen bottles shot off a fence.  
Not I.

BARMAID

Sugarfoot himself.

*CHARLEY shoots "Sugarfoot" dead with a finger gun, as LADY and  
BARMAID laugh. DOCTOR looks down at his foot, puzzled, and begins to  
divest himself of the hanky around his ankle. HUSBAND slams tables  
back into place.*

HUSBAND

Sounds as if y'all just cut dirt to run away.

DOCTOR

No bandit could survive Parkhurst's professional aim.

HUSBAND

So you escaped a rowdy. Ain't that just a part of the job?

BARMAID

Hobble your lip.

HUSBAND

Devil take your horseshit and—

*CHARLEY intervenes between HUSBAND and BARMAID.*

CHARLEY

I'll gladly take that drink the good Doctor offered.

*HUSBAND storms into the kitchen. CHARLEY sets his hat down and leans on the bar.*

BARMAID

What'll it be?

CHARLEY

Set me up your best coffin varnish,  
if you please, ma'am.

*BARMAID slides a glass of whiskey over to CHARLEY, who tosses it back in one gulp.*

BARMAID

A polite customer.  
Been a while since I've been called  
aught but a lady of the line.  
But the whole damn thing was my idea.  
It was me with the thought to mine the miners,  
feed these newly rich men a decent meal  
For which you know they're grateful  
And grateful in California means gold  
Here it was me with the thoughts  
and the plans

BARMAID (*continued*)  
And him with that mouth  
and the back of his hand

CHARLEY  
That ain't no way to treat his wife,  
'specially when she pours such a decent drop.

*CHARLEY slides the glass back for a refill.*

CHARLEY  
Much obliged.

BARMAID  
Been a while since I've been called  
aught but a calico queen.  
But the whole damn thing was my idea.  
No shame, honest work to mine the miners  
Don't twist my dreams of a decent deal  
I sold what I had, they were grateful--  
And grateful in California means gold.  
Here it was me with the thoughts  
and the plans  
He thinks that he saved me--  
ain't that just like a man?

& CHARLEY (*counterpoint*)  
You don't see the pain  
when you're inside it--  
I remember.  
Took me two years to realize  
if I didn't get out  
I'd spend my whole life  
scrubbing and fetching  
punished for thinking  
polite, always yes ma'am,  
yes sir  
yes ma'am  
that's no life.  
So I ran.

*HUSBAND returns with a tray and bangs it down on the bar, startling everyone. He glares at BARMAID.*

LADY and DOCTOR (*to each other*)  
That's no good way to treat one's wife!

HUSBAND  
Improper, flirting with every whip that drives through...

*BARMAID edges out from behind the bar, making space for her HUSBAND.*

HUSBAND (*Caustically*)  
Much obliged.

*BARMAID turns to look at her HUSBAND for a moment.*

BARMAID  
Been a while since you said  
any word of thanks to me.

*She moves away to refill drinks for the other patrons in the saloon.*

BARMAID  
But the whole damn thing was my idea.  
No blame but my own to choose a tough man.  
But I believe our love is decent, real--  
Just wish it made him more grateful,  
grateful my business savvy means gold!  
How could I leave? You can't  
understand--  
Got a babe on the way  
and a good but harsh man.

& CHARLEY (*counterpoint*)  
You don't feel the strain  
when it's just normal--  
I remember.  
Don't wait til it's worse  
if you don't get out now  
You could spend your whole life  
cringing, avoiding,  
the fists of a man  
who don't give a damn--  
You should run  
while you can.

& HUSBAND (*another simultaneous layer*)

Been a while since you smiled  
and looked at me that way.  
Ma said I was worthless  
just another mouth to feed,  
but you said I was kind and handsome  
and I offered you a better life with me  
All I want is to be enough for you.  
Seems I never can,  
empty prospector's pan:  
Keep speculating on you, and now  
here I am.

LADY (*repeating under and over the rest of the ensemble*)  
It's quite upsetting!

DOCTOR  
So distressing!

LADY  
So do something about that man!

*By the end of this third stanza, BARMAID has made her way back around to the bar. She hears CHARLEY's last few lines, and shakes CHARLEY's shoulders, as if to reassure him that his concerns are unfounded.*

*HUSBAND watches as BARMAID touches CHARLEY. HUSBAND growls and looks like he might get violent again. DOCTOR gathers his courage.*

DOCTOR  
I will, ma'am!  
(*to the HUSBAND*)  
You have in your saloon, sir,  
the greatest western hero  
since Kit Carson himself.

CHARLEY  
I killed a man today.

DOCTOR (*continued*)  
A true gentleman.



BARMAID

I about did the same.  
The mess he made  
of our accounts!

HUSBAND

Bunch of balderdash.

DOCTOR

Balderdash?! Why I oughta—

HUSBAND

You're mighty enamored of that whip,  
defending his reputation.  
Makes me wonder  
if we've got a Nancy-man on our hands.

LADY

Sir!

CHARLEY

Why do you stay?

BARMAID

*(with bitter sarcasm)*

I should strike out on my own?

DOCTOR

Now

Now

Now

Now you listen here!

BARMAID

Buy me a whip, be a bullfighter girl  
like the one in Virginia City?

*She slams a cup down. A lull in their conversation—  
CHARLEY may have pushed her too far.*

LADY

That's right!

And I'll thank you not to mention such  
unsavory notions with a lady present.

HUSBAND  
Well pardon me.

*HUSBAND makes his escape, clearing their glasses...*

CHARLEY  
Well maybe not a bullfighter girl, then.  
But still--

*The BARMAID glares at him, and he changes tactics.*

CHARLEY  
Begging you pardon.  
I killed a man today.  
Ain't gonna ask after  
my tenderhearted feelings?

BARMAID  
Sounds like a thundering frolic.

*He pulls some tobacco out of his pocket.*

BARMAID  
A nasty habit.

*CHARLEY laughs. He chews during the rests in his aria.*

BARMAID  
You would think so too, if you cleaned the spittoons!

CHARLEY  
Tobacker's the sign;  
when I'm a little skeer'd,  
I chaw more'n ordinary.  
Then I know the road's bad.  
Tobacker's the sign;  
when I'm a little skeer'd,  
I chaw more'n ordinary.  
Then I know the road's bad.  
He dry-gulched us.  
Hate not seein' it comin -  
What's around the bend.  
Tobacker's my friend, only one who knows my trouble  
Only friend who's got my back

CHARLEY (*continued*)

And beggin' your pardon, but I sort of enjoy it,  
havin' a nasty, manly habit.  
Calms my soul, just the wheels and the road  
Tobacker's my friend, lay me down to sleep at night  
knows all my secrets and never lets on  
Never calls me an odd fish, no  
it makes me feel I'm a rip-snortin' dandified hero  
Tobacker I'll ride the river with  
Won't surprise me or betray me  
Take advantage or defame me  
Tobacker's the sign;  
when I'm a little skeer'd,  
I chaw more'n ordinary.  
Then I know the road's bad.  
Tobacker's the sign;  
when I'm a little skeer'd,  
I chaw more'n ordinary.  
Then I know the road's bad.  
He dry-gulched us  
Shoulda seen it comin.  
'Bout pissed myself.

BARMAID

I would've.

CHARLEY

Well, maybe - you're not accustomed to such things.  
Another. Please.

BARMAID

I like to think I could shoot a bandit,  
if he were fixing to shoot me.

*He drinks. On HUSBAND's next pass through the room, DOCTOR launches into another tirade and loops HUSBAND back into their conversation.*

DOCTOR

I simply think one must acknowledge  
when there's a hero in his midst.  
Sure, it's part of the job  
to protect the load.  
But Parkhust goes above and beyond.

DOCTOR (*continued*)

Is a driver expected  
to barrel across a rickety bridge  
that's half swallowed up  
in gully-washing stormy water  
even as it collapses?  
Is it part of the job  
to hang onto your reins like Old Scratch  
(begging your pardon, miss),  
even when your horses bolt  
on a twistical road  
to steer them back  
and save lives,  
not to mention the box?

LADY

(*with glee*)

How terrifying!

HUSBAND

That was a nice trick.

DOCTOR

A trick?! It earned him more respect  
than you're here giving, I'd say.

*DOCTOR starts to make fists. LADY intervenes and distracts DOCTOR.  
She winks at HUSBAND, who makes his getaway—but not before  
noticing how deep BARMAID is in conversation with CHARLEY.*

CHARLEY

Plenty of girls  
run boardinghouses all on their own.

BARMAID

And those get called brothels.

CHARLEY

Honest work.

BARMAID

Not what I want.

CHARLEY

There's a lady in the paper  
who boasts that she made  
eighteen thousand dollars  
just by baking pies.  
I can personally attest  
to the quality of the pies you bake.  
It's a good country for women out West, I'll say it.

BARMAID

A good country for women out West.

CHARLEY

You could be anything.

BARMAID

A good country for women out here  
If your skin's lily white.  
*(amending)*  
Or you're willing to flirt.  
Ain't so different from home: know your place.

*She slides him another, and downs one herself.*

CHARLEY

Once knew a girl back East  
Beaten and put to hard labor  
in a home for abandons  
She got herself free  
If she could do it, why not you?

BARMAID

It ain't like that.  
It ain't so bad.

*The LADY and DOCTOR wave the BARMAID over to their table.*

LADY

Madam, thank you for your hospitality.

DOCTOR

I'd like to pony up that tab.  
And a dollar for the little shaver on the way!

*He pats the BARMAID's stomach, and she tenses.*

DOCTOR

And one more drink for the man of the hour!

*He pays BARMAID, throws an arm around CHARLEY, and steers him off to a manly conversation we don't hear. LADY sizes up the BARMAID and gestures to DOCTOR's vacated chair.*

LADY

Take a load off.

For just a moment, my dear.

It's clear you need to sit a spell

A hopping night! It's all right

To take a moment for yourself.

*BARMAID sits, laughing.*

BARMAID

Well, if you insist.

LADY

What a wonderful life, my dear!

It's clear you run this place so well

With fortitude, not servitude -

You make your choices for yourself.

BARMAID

Ain't that a pretty vision.

You must enjoy those newfangled novels.

LADY

Oh bosh.

How wild it is, on the frontier!

It's clear you're thriving, I can tell

your babe will grow, and she will know

to make her choices for herself.

& BARMAID (*counterpoint*)

Don't I wish it were that way

It's folks like you who've got the freedom

A fattened purse, a fancy hat, and

you can make your choices for yourself.

CHARLEY

*(pounding the bar, in response to something the DOCTOR has said)*  
That's right!  
That outlaw's dead of lead poisinin' by now!

*He stumbles and crashes into something. BARMAID jumps up, smiles at the LADY, and goes to take away CHARLEY's glass. DOCTOR comes over to the LADY and tips his hat, about to leave. LADY winks at BARMAID.*

LADY

Well I'd just love to hear some more of your fascinating stories.

DOCTOR

I could tell 'em!

BARMAID

You had to do it.  
So quit griping  
about your tender heart.

LADY

And since we're stopping over,  
perhaps you could escort me  
to a respectable establishment?

DOCTOR

Certainly, miss.

*DOCTOR offers LADY his arm and they head out. The saloon has started to clear.*

BARMAID

How about a nice glass of water?

CHARLEY

He robbed me before.  
That's when I began goin' heeled,  
two in a holster and  
one beside me on the bench at all times.  
Swore it wouldn't happen again.

*HUSBAND emerges from the kitchen and sidles up beside the bar, watching CHARLEY.*

BARMAID  
And it won't.

CHARLEY  
Never again will good folks be robbed in my coach!

HUSBAND  
Well, somebody's paintin' his tonsils this evening.

BARMAID  
It was a rough day.

HUSBAND  
Seems so.

BARMAID  
Put him to bed, make yourself useful.

HUSBAND  
Gee up, Charley, let's get that coat off.

*BARMAID picks up a tray of used glasses and exits into the kitchen.  
HUSBAND hoists the drunken CHARLEY up, and begins to unbutton his  
coat for him. CHARLEY swats at him ineffectively.*

CHARLEY  
I'll thank you to let me button unbutton hic my own trousers!

HUSBAND  
You're just a drunkard with a whip.

CHARLEY  
Nope, nope nope!

*The HUSBAND has gotten off a couple layers of coat and vest, when he  
stops. Beneath CHARLEY's undershirt is visible the clear shape of a  
corset, binding his chest flat. HUSBAND only registers the garment, not  
that Charley has breasts. CHARLEY looks down in a moment of dizzy  
awareness, then shrinks into himself, masking the shape of his chest.*

CHARLEY  
No—



HUSBAND

You some sort of a deviant Molly?  
Why in tarnation is a grown man wearing a corset?

*CHARLEY is suddenly quite sober. He punches HUSBAND in the stomach, and HUSBAND doubles over. When he starts to scramble up, CHARLEY is pointing a pistol at his head.*

HUSBAND

What the devil—

CHARLEY

You say nothing of this to anybody. Not a damn word.

HUSBAND

Yes “ma'am.”

*HUSBAND chuckles. CHARLEY hits HUSBAND hard again.*

CHARLEY

That's "Sir" to you.

HUSBAND

I only—

CHARLEY

I do the talking.

HUSBAND

You certainly got the right, "sir," bein' as you're the one holdin' that pistol.

*HUSBAND feints and then catches CHARLEY in a rough hold. The pistol clatters to the ground. Unseen by the men, BARMAID slips in from the kitchen, in the shadows. She carries her husband's pistol in shaking hands.*

HUSBAND

The right to get turned over to the authorities  
for pervertin' all what's natural!

CHARLEY

Let me go.

HUSBAND

Dressed like a little piece of calico. You gonna cry?

CHARLEY

I killed one man today, fixing to make it two.

HUSBAND

Blustery talk for a sodomite.

*BARMAID cocks the pistol, steps out, and points it at her HUSBAND.*

BARMAID

Let him go.

HUSBAND

Him who? Woman, don't you point that gun at me.

BARMAID

Charley.

*HUSBAND flips CHARLEY around so BARMAID can see Charley's corset.*

HUSBAND

This invert in lady's garb?

BARMAID

Sure got a hankering to pull this trigger.

*HUSBAND begins to laugh.*

HUSBAND

A real man, right?

Go out and get a job like Charley the Whip,  
a real man, a real man!

*CHARLEY stomps HUSBAND's foot and breaks his hold. In the ensuing fight, HUSBAND knocks into BARMAID's stomach violently, and she screams. HUSBAND stoops to pick up CHARLEY's dropped pistol, but CHARLEY gets there first, knocks it away from him, and breaks HUSBAND's leg. HUSBAND falls, but crawls toward the BARMAID.*

HUSBAND

I am goin' to kill you for this.

BARMAID

No, I believe I'm gonna kill you.

*She shoots him in the chest. HUSBAND slumps to the floor behind the bar, dead. A breathless moment, and then BARMAID doubles over with a gasp, and a dark stain spreading over her skirts. A contraction. No screaming or melodrama, just breath and pain.*

CHARLEY

Devil. He getcha?

BARMAID

The baby—  
I thought it was just a little blood  
these past few days  
but this—

CHARLEY

You're losing a child?

BARMAID

You gonna run?

*And he might, for a moment. But he chooses to stay.*

CHARLEY

I—  
I've done what you're doing  
alone.  
Nobody ought to do this alone.

BARMAID

What?

*CHARLEY eases her into a chair.*

BARMAID

At least say something.

*She clocks his now-obvious corset, which he's trying to hide with crossed arms.*

CHARLEY

Breathe, like so.

*CHARLEY breathes. BARMAID breathes. A contraction.*

BARMAID  
Ain't enough!

CHARLEY  
And think  
think about something sweet, something—

BARMAID  
I'll bite the ground by morning, for sure.  
It was how my mother went, too—

*A contraction.*

CHARLEY  
I survived it.

BARMAID  
You?

CHARLEY  
When my baby died.  
I've got through worse.

BARMAID  
*(through another contraction)*  
Keep talking, damn you.

CHARLEY  
Got through  
plenty of things that almost killed me.  
Through the love that sowed the seeds, true love.  
Through the betrayal of my body,  
how it grew round and soft  
Womanly, womanly—  
*(in response to another contraction, and also his memory)*  
Breathe—breathe—  
Lived through the loss of the lover who saw me golden despite  
how I saw my own reflection.  
And the shortness of breath when I corseted my chest,  
Sure, I got through all that and more, see—

CHARLEY (*continued*)

The quiet blood, the life inside, the ending—

That

taught me I was strong.

Got through the night when mama left

still haunts my dreams and wakes me up sweating

*(in response to another contraction, and also his memory)*

Breathe—breathe—

Through kneeling on grits for asking the matron a question

And escape in the night, the beautiful freedom

Through the years of secrets, the horses, their speed

Sure, I got through all that and more, see—

The quiet blood, the life inside, the ending—

BARMAID

The life inside

the ending—

*(another contraction)*

CHARLEY

Just

showed me I was strong.

And strong

got me here today.

BARMAID

That's something sweet.

What was her—

his? name—your

lover?

CHARLEY

William. Bill.

I'll fetch back that doctor—

BARMAID

No!

I never wanted his child.

Damn me for not grieving,

it ain't natural.

But it is a relief.

At least until the news gets out

that I'm a murderer.

I don't have the heart to be an outlaw, always running.

BARMAID (*continued*)

Can you imagine me robbing your coach?

Best leave me to bleed

If I'm looking at jail or worse over that dead body.

*CHARLEY walks over to HUSBAND's body and nudges it with his foot.*

CHARLEY

Oh, your man?

I'm sure it wasn't you.

It was the outlaw,

the rowdy who ran

when I woke to find him murdering your man

moments ago.

BARMAID

But—

CHARLEY

Your man who died in my arms,

which set you into labor, so I couldn't give chase.

BARMAID

Far fetched.

CHARLEY

He's not liked.

And I'm a mite famous, what with this Sugarfoot business.

BARMAID

I could keep the eatery—

CHARLEY

Here you with a dead man and a lost babe,

grinning like a baked possum.

BARMAID

I could be anything.

CHARLEY

Plenty of girls run eateries all on their own.

BARMAID

Honest work.

And there's a lady in the paper who boasts that she made  
eighteen thousand dollars just by baking pies.

CHARLEY

Your pies are the best.

BARMAID

It's a good country for women out west.

CHARLEY

You can be anything.

BARMAID

Anything—

You got a box full'o gold and glory instead of a child.  
Maybe I'll learn to drive.

CHARLEY

Ha. I'm no better off now than when I commenced.

BARMAID

Now that's a lie.

CHARLEY

Pay's small, work's heavy.

BARMAID

Every kind of work is heavy.

CHARLEY

Gettin' old, rheumatism in the bones.

Nobody to look out for old used-up stage drivers.

Kick the bucket one of these days, and that's the last of old Charley.

*CHARLEY picks up his pistol. He considers it, cleans it well, and hands it  
to BARMAID. He picks up the pistol she used to shoot her husband and  
puts it in his holster.*

CHARLEY

An independent businesslady

oughta have her own barking iron.

But perhaps not the one that killed your man.

BARMAID

And you?

CHARLEY

I suppose you'll be telling this around.  
Since it perverts what's proper.  
My whole damn life I've been running from the day  
they'd find out I'm not a proper man.  
But what else can I be? What would they make me try to become?  
Never could get the hang of it,  
no matter how much they tried to beat it into me  
never could walk right, talk right, be a proper - proper - proper  
I do pervert what's proper,  
this is who I am.

*He stops holding his vest closed, and turns on her with his corset showing.*

BARMAID

Are you a—  
woman then?

CHARLEY

*(sharply)*

No.  
Maybe when my mama named me but.  
No.  
You wouldn't understand.

*She goes to him and buttons up his shirt and vest.*

BARMAID

I never got much help from what's proper.  
There were people here  
before this place got "discovered," you know.  
They come here telling stories, just like you.  
Don't think they'd say you're not proper.  
Way I see it, we're on their land,  
Their tribes have a name and a place for folks like you,  
so why shouldn't I?  
I never got much help from what's proper.  
Way I see it, all that proper means  
is you let the hardest hand or the loudest holler  
swindle the rest.



BARMAID (*continued*)

If most folks out there are too damned proper to understand,  
in here you're all right.  
Seems to me it's simple.  
You are who you are.  
If you want to keep a secret, your secret's safe with me.

CHARLEY

Much obliged.

*He fetches his coat, discarded earlier.*

BARMAID

Bet you could use some warm things for the road in winter.  
Through the kitchen, take a look at his things.  
take what you'd like.

CHARLEY

Much obliged.

*CHARLEY exits through the kitchen.*

*BARMAID picks herself up and stares at her HUSBAND's body. After a moment, she gets a rag or a mop, and cleans up any blood that's left on the floor.*

*BARMAID stands beside the bar and ties a fresh apron on, masking as HUSBAND's body disappears. She straightens the room, erasing the evidence of violence.*

*She goes behind the bar, throws a clean towel over her shoulder, and smiles.*

*Time passes, and small changes show how she takes ownership of her bar. She pulls pies out of the oven and we all salivate. Perhaps folks come in and out, eating pie, drinking, laughing. Maybe she hangs pictures and lace curtains.*

*Finally, we are again nineteen years later, January 1880, as in the prologue. The BARMAID sits with the newspaper again.*

*CHARLEY appears, leans on the bar, tips his hat. BARMAID sees him and smiles.*

BARMAID

Keep thinking I'll look over and see you leaning there again.  
They keep calling you a woman in the papers.

It's a damn lie.

"Astounding..."

"...that a young woman should assume a man's attire, and,  
friendless and alone, defy the dangers—"

"That she should achieve distinction  
in an occupation...calling for the best physical qualities  
of nerve, courage, coolness, and endurance..."

"That she should finally go knowingly down to her death  
without disclosing by word or deed  
who she--"

who HE was.

"Friendless and alone..."

*She slams the paper down.*

CHARLEY

Ever wonder what your life would be  
if you'd been born  
a hundred years from now, two hundred?

BARMAID

All the time. Reckon it would be marvelous.

CHARLEY

A name and a place for folks like me, you said.

BARMAID

In a hundred years?

CHARLEY

Two hundred?

*BARMAID takes CHARLEY's hand.*

BARMAID

You saw a place for me,  
all my own.

CHARLEY

You called me what I am.

BOTH  
Like it was simple.

BARMAID  
Chewed my nails to bloody bits for months—

CHARLEY  
Chewed more tobacker than ordinary for weeks—

BOTH  
But you never told a soul.  
Like it was simple.

BARMAID  
Simple.  
You are who you are.

CHARLEY  
Hundred years, way things are going,  
it'll be a good country for folks like us,  
that's what I reckon. And until then—

BOTH  
You want to keep a secret, your secret's safe with me.

*She raises her glass to him, and he disappears.*

**the end**

# Bog Butter

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by

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## Characters

A

She's in her early twenties, and it's hard.

B

A's half-sister. She's in her mid-twenties, and it's not as much easier as she'd hoped.

MOTHER

Eternal. Sometimes she talks like a computerized assistant, sometimes with an Irish accent. Sometimes she's human and sometimes something more.

PAST DAUGHTER

Ancient.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Human.

BOG

A warm female voice from everywhere and nowhere; sometimes embodied by a chorus of the same actors playing Mother, Past Daughter, and Future Daughter.

Please be thoughtfully color (& age, & ability, etc) conscious when casting. Let's chat about the stories different casting choices might tell.

I imagine based on current statistics that the future will be populated mostly with people of color. I know that the present world I live in has far more people of color than white people. Myth and history tell us that folks in Ireland 4000 years ago probably had white skin, and identified as indigenous to their land. With all that in mind, any character may be portrayed by an actor of any race.

### Some notes on the Bog

She is a voice that contains simultaneous multitudes, the soft whisper of lullaby and the harsh rasp of wolves and wind, and somehow also the voices of every character in the play.

In Her breath are snatches of natural sounds as well as human language, things She has overheard and learned and buried. She reflects back human sounds, rearranged, repeated, preserved and changed.

You might create Her mostly out of sound-art, embodied only in key moments by the actor who plays the Mother, joined at the end by the actors who play Past Daughter & Future Daughter. In this case, you could cast the play with just 5 actors.

Or you might cast a whole chorus of mothers and maidens from every moment of herstory. Maybe their costumes are the only set piece. Maybe they arise out of the actual site-specific peat bog where you're bringing this play to life.

She's organic. She is messy.

Many possibilities could tell her story well.

### Some production notes

I suspect the next scene always starts before the previous scene fully ends. I suspect we all hold space for our histories and futures all the time, simultaneously. I suspect my sister would say I'm a weirdo for saying that.

This is not a play where there is a blackout and hurried scene change every few pages.

Put your nerd glasses on, we're gonna talk about language

/ indicates where the next line interrupts a current line.  
In the Bog's lines, many sounds happen simultaneously.

The Past world uses a grammar drawn from Ulster English, archaic constructions of Irish dialects, some Pictish, and some Basque.

Bronze-age Ireland had not yet encountered Celtic colonization, much less Roman. However, I have taken some liberties in modeling some of their grammar after older Irish English, which draws its forms from Gaelic (for example, most of their questions are in fact statements; "Is it not yourself" is the equivalent of "hello," etc). Some linguists have theorized that folks in Ireland during the Bronze Age spoke something similar to Basque or Pictish, which predate many Indo-European influences.

What's important is that these women are speaking the language natural to them, easily, naturally, not performing an exoticized primitiveness.

In the near Present world, I'm fascinated by upspeak, ums and likes as verbal ornamentation and armor against sexist speech patterns (protection against being interrupted, etc).

Take this farther if you'd like - pepper their speech with the adornments of young American womanhood in the 21st Century, trusting the performers' poetic impulses.

Silence is a hot commodity, rare in a rhythm of finishing each other's sentences and interrupting. Find space to let silence sing, but please never slow the rapid pace of the Present world's speech unless it's absolutely natural.

In the Future, I've imagined a world where computerized precision has rendered emotion old-fashioned and strange. Sound-bites and the rhythms of speech we hear from Siri/Alexa today are the norm.

I wonder if the Future Daughter, despite not being robotic at all, might have learned some of those rhythms simply because that's how everyone around her speaks. I imagine it is frustrating for the Mother to slow her speech to a speed her Daughter can understand.

It's second-nature for people in the Future world to name emotions as separate from self, rather than descriptions of self.



ONE.

Outside time, a peat Bog  
breathes. As She breathes,  
her voice conjures her rural  
landscape, wet and acidic, a  
sky bigger than seems  
possible.

We enter her space.

TWO.

A few years from right now,  
summer. A and B hike into the  
peat bog. Many selfies taken  
and tweeted along the way. A  
is in LuluLemon leggings,  
Uggs, a Northface. B is in  
something flowing and  
vintagey and combat boots.

A

Like do you know how hackable the power grid is?  
Anyway yeah so I've been like thinking about a  
social media cleanse.  
I started drinking bulletproof coffee, which  
helps. Research has shown that

B

Does it worry you, how basic you are?

A

Does it worry you  
how you're so busy conforming to hipsterdom  
that you can't just enjoy fun shit?

B

Does it worry you  
that your like pseudo psychology  
keeps you from ever doing anything authentic?

A

Does it worry you  
that your judgmental bullshit  
alienates your sister in stupid arguments?

B

Does it worry you  
that you're still gonna go out with me tonight  
to that super quaint little pub  
and we're gonna laugh louder than is socially  
appropriate  
even though we have  
almost no experiences in common anymore? And

all the anger that you store up  
under your like quirky--

A

/That's a sexist word.

B

/--nerd glasses or whatever  
is going to go sour underneath the drinks  
and you're gonna like throw up  
and I'm gonna be the one washing your face?

A

We don't though, do we?  
Have anything in common.

B

Dad, and Mom, and--

A

I'm  
gay.

Silence. The BOG breathes.

B

...whoa. Ok, ok cool, ok, um, congrats? Like - I  
mean. No problem! Awesome! That's? Wow? Yeah. I  
had a couple great friends at my old job who -  
that's like completely irrelevant, sorry - what I  
mean is like. Wow. Thank you for telling me?

A

You're  
welcome?

B

Cool!

A

Cool.

B

Wow. Awesome. Ok wow. Does  
mom know?

A

I mean no. She would like flip a shit.

B

Dude, she just--

A

This isn't about her. It's about us.

B

It's hard.

A

What, that I like  
like girls?

B

No, no like  
whatever, no. Just.  
I mean like it's weird with you living so far  
away

A

It's just a year.

B

Yeah sure but like fellowships turn into  
jobs and then

A

I mean I wish

B

and like but already those trips  
when you come home are like  
/always so short

A

/really fucking stressful

B  
/uh huh yeah  
no so that's like why I wanted to like

A  
Sister trip!

B  
Sister trip!

A brief awkward silence.

A  
No but it is like  
so sweet that you like  
flew all the way around the world to meet up  
like yes to the pubs and the like  
adorable towns and the views and like just  
everything?

B  
Right?! So so good! And like, look at this  
freaking gorgeous  
bogggg!

A  
Um. Sure?  
But also like what exactly is the plan here?  
Like,

B  
Ok ok are you ready?

A  
I have literally been ready since March,  
this day is a giant hole in my spreadsheet  
about our trip, and

B  
OMG you're adorable.

A

I like to be organized!  
Spreadsheets are a legitimate coping mechanism,  
what?

B

Ok. So. I saw this cooking show, right?  
Next time you're freaking out you should try  
that instead of like  
making a graph or whatever. It's  
so  
freaking  
soothing  
And the chef dude was suuuuper hot.  
Um.  
And like also the ladies on the show are also  
super hot,  
totally! like  
but not in an objectifying or -  
Sorry is that weird? I'm not trying to -  
I mean like I have a lot to learn obvi  
It's not like they  
taught us this in Youth Group haha or  
yeah and I like  
know stuff in theory like  
I've read the thinkpieces I know like  
all the right words  
Queerness and and and like Stonewall  
or whatever  
but like that's not enough to make me a a  
a good ally and  
recently I went down this internet rabbit hole  
about  
like emotional labor  
which sidebar is so real! YES!  
but I guess I honestly  
don't know a lot of people  
who are who are  
Anyway! The cooking show did this whole thing on  
fermented foods and like  
You have to tell me if I'm being weird, I'm  
totally being weird, sorry.

Silence.

A

I just um don't cook.

B

Oooooooooohhhhhh.

An awkward silence.  
The BOG breathes.

A

Hey hey - selfie!

B takes a picture of them  
together.

B

So good. I'm sending it to Mom.

A

Can we like - let's just. How about instead of  
Mom we -  
What happened to like "be here now?"

B

Oh so ok when I changed churches I  
like did go through that meditation phase because  
spirituality is still like really important to me  
and but  
then like it turns out mindfulness is hella  
appropriation  
of traditions that western culture has like  
decimated and now like  
I'm trying to decolonize my mind and--

A

You do look super cute though.

B

Shut up, so do you!

A

No, you!

B  
Youuuuu.

Silence.

A  
Um.  
And so wait -  
how do we get from binging a cooking show  
to dragging your sister  
out into an Irish peat bog?  
I feel like -  
help me make the connections.

B  
All right, so. I dunno how much you know about  
like  
bogs?  
But they are freaking bananas. They like  
freeze time.

A  
No yeah I read an article about like  
how they've found human bodies buried in them  
like completely intact,  
with hair and skin and shit, from like  
thousands of years ago?

B  
Um creepy.  
No but like. Ok so like for part of this  
fermentation episode, Marco -

A  
Marco?

B  
My celebrity chef lover, keep up.

A  
Ah.



B  
Marco came to Ireland and tasted this  
butter.

A  
I do love butter.

B  
Ok but get this, it was butter  
that they'd found like  
buried in a bog.

A  
So -

B  
Yesssss. This exact bog! What!

A makes a sound and gesture  
like "mind: blown."

B (cont'd)  
Right?!  
And it was like super old.

A  
Ew.

B  
No, no it was like  
still edible! Like, not super yummy to our  
"contemporary palate" or whatever but.  
It had been preserved.

A  
Wait so you're saying  
somebody churned butter  
like a thousand / years ago or like

B  
/ No it was like four or five thousand.

A

Like holy shit.

B

Some woman made that.

A

Exactly, yes, some *woman*, like  
everything else that's that old is like what,  
some kind of penis-shaped monument  
made by dudes.

B

Ok Feminism. But like tbh yeah,  
I feel like people don't talk about  
how it's stuff that's domestic  
that / actually *endures*?!

A

/Do not tell me  
Mom like got in your head about  
feminism and domestic life and like  
the holiness of traditional gender roles like  
oh my god.

B

I thought the rule was no talking about--

A

It is it is I just don't want you to like.  
Ugh ok.  
My point was that it's like freaking time travel!  
Like if like the world ended  
and there was no other normal food or something,  
I could potentially find butter  
buried in these bogs, and like  
eat it?

B

Marco did.

A  
But like and doesn't that immediately beg the  
question  
Like if we  
like theoretically if we buried some butter,  
who might dig it up  
like five thousand years from now?!

B  
OMG so like.  
Guess what is in my bag.

A  
Shut up.

B  
Uh-huh.

A  
You did not.

B  
I absolutely did.

A  
Shut up.

B opens her bag to reveal a  
wooden container full of  
butter.

B  
I found this box thingy at home,  
I guess apparently they like  
would bury it in wooden containers?

A  
How did you get  
butter like through customs?

B  
I bought it last night!

A  
Shut up.

B  
Right?!

A  
You're such a weirdo.

B  
Ok so. For the spreadsheet:  
we're gonna hike a little bit,  
and then we're gonna like  
find the right place,  
the place that like moves our souls as  
dairymaids,  
and we're gonna bury it.

B snaps a selfie. A is still  
processing; she looks sort of  
incredulous.

B (cont'd)  
Ha! You look so surprised, are you surprised?

Off they hike, butter in tow.

The BOG digests what She has  
witnessed, fermenting their  
language in new syllables and  
overlapping whispers.

BOG  
/ifffff  
/thank k k k who  
/wh wh now if  
/(love)  
/ussssss

THREE.

4000 years ago, early summer.  
A jug made of animal skin  
swings like a pendulum,  
suspended from a branch. A  
MOTHER and a DAUGHTER are  
churning butter by the bog,  
pushing the skin full of  
cream back and forth between  
them.

The BOG breathes, fermenting  
some of their words along  
with whatever they bury and  
drop.

PAST DAUGHTER  
Will you not hush about the solstice!

MOTHER  
Amn't I simple wanting you reassured, then?

PAST DAUGHTER  
I be fine.

MOTHER  
Oh, such a worldly maiden, now.

PAST DAUGHTER  
I don't your advice be needing. I be knowing my  
own mind.

They loose the skin of  
churned butter from its  
ropes, and MOTHER opens it up  
expertly to spill the whey to  
the earth.

MOTHER  
Your own mind sure,  
but small as a nut that is.  
Didn't I think the same, then, when I a girl once  
was.

PAST DAUGHTER

If wisdom's to choose a hairy old man  
instead of a strong young one, I be fine  
muddling through without that wisdom.

MOTHER

We're after three years of a bad harvest,  
and full his stores despite the drought.  
Can you not understand?  
Tis the way of things.  
You might right learn to be happy.

PAST DAUGHTER

Won't I fight tooth and scratch, won't I?  
'Fore I'm given away like a calf for slaughter?

MOTHER sits with some  
difficulty, stiff. PAST  
DAUGHTER kneads the butter in  
a wooden bowl, working it  
into a cohesive lump.

MOTHER

You will, wee idiot.  
Tis stint now to save for later, think beyond  
this day and your own belly for a breath.

PAST DAUGHTER

I hate you.

MOTHER

You do not, now.

PAST DAUGHTER

It be not mine the blame for a bad harvest.

MOTHER

Me, me, me.  
Don't be a fool.  
It be no blame but the land's, and hence the  
offering.  
Poor harvest a sacrifice wants.

PAST DAUGHTER

Will you believe that for true? I cannot.

MOTHER

Cannot you feel the land grow warm against our  
touch,  
cannot you feel the cycles and circles,  
how we bury the butter today  
and doesn't the Bog give it back in the frosty  
dark months,  
doesn't She provide for us when we  
give of our stores to Her?  
Sure I believe it.

PAST DAUGHTER

I do not think the Bog be caring one mite  
about us.

MOTHER

Now!

PAST DAUGHTER

I do not think it matters, the sacrifice,  
to turn the rains or hold off the frost.  
A bog it be, nothing more, a wet and cold place  
for to preserve food.

MOTHER

Foolishness and stark folly.  
But even so.  
If only a Bog it be, be glad then to bury this  
butter.  
If only for to dig it up it in winter for your  
cold, empty, foolish belly.

PAST DAUGHTER

I be hungry now, this day.

PAST DAUGHTER leans in to  
smell the butter, eyes  
shining.

MOTHER

A man we know with full stores, were only you to  
dance for him by the solstice fires,  
were only you to make him your choice.

PAST DAUGHTER

I will not let you ruin my life.

MOTHER

And what be you expecting? Tis the way of the  
world.

PAST DAUGHTER

Then change it.

MOTHER

And what power might I have  
in my little common self  
to do that?

PAST DAUGHTER

Let's eat the butter now! Let's  
our grumbly bellies fill!  
Don't I hate the way my innards carp  
and take me from the thoughts I be  
thinking.

MOTHER

All the more reason to marry rich, then.

PAST DAUGHTER

The more I'll not be running after babes  
and laboring for to feed a man,  
the more my mind might run, free.  
What be the name for the notion  
when you do not wish to be thinking  
of any food or mess,  
what be the notion for simple, simple  
wondering...

PAST DAUGHTER scrapes a small  
amount of butter off the lump  
she has kneaded. She lifts



her greasy hands to to lick  
them.

MOTHER slaps her hands back  
into the bowl. She holds PAST  
DAUGHTER's hands and scrapes  
every bit of butter off of  
them, back onto the larger  
lump.

MOTHER

A child you be no longer.  
What power I have to choose, doesn't it come  
from following  
what I was taught, and  
you'd do well do the same.

PAST DAUGHTER pulls out of  
MOTHER's grasp and stands,  
furious.

PAST DAUGHTER

I be wanting just to be myself, sun in my hair,  
not some rich man's slave,  
tied to his bed to buy his grain.  
Myself.

MOTHER

Myself myself myself, feh.  
The matter be finished, child.  
Go wash and make ready.

PAST DAUGHTER flings the  
empty butter skin at her  
MOTHER and runs away,  
graceful and immediate.

PAST DAUGHTER

I will not do it!

MOTHER

Unwise mot of mine.  
You'll be coming around see sense soon enough.

She shapes the butter into a cylinder and wraps it in leaves, or works it into a keg of bark and moss. She buries it in the Bog. This probably takes time - a familiar ritual of practiced gestures.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
We offer to You.

The BOG breathes.

When she has finished burying her butter, MOTHER hollers for her daughter.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
Will you come along!

PAST DAUGHTER does not emerge. After a moment, MOTHER sighs and makes her way back toward their village.

BOG  
/you yyyyyyyou  
/finishhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh  
/beyond d d d  
/now mine n n now  
/want

FOUR.

Now-ish. A and B are  
returning from their hike  
through the bog.

A  
Hot.

B  
Right?! Travel is like  
downright  
sexy.

A  
No I mean climate change.

B  
Depressing.

B takes a small shovel out of  
her bag.

B (cont'd)  
Dang it now I'm like thinking about global  
warming.

A  
Climate change.

B  
Whatever.

A  
Nuh-uh whatever!  
The one means evil politicians can say things  
like "global warming's not real, look at all this  
snow! Let's burn more coal!" and the other is  
like more  
accurate. Precision /

B  
"/Precision of language / is very--"

A  
/Precision of language *is* very important,  
don't mock me. It's a big deal!

B  
Breathe, dude.  
My point is.  
As a layperson,  
like, in this wet, sensuous bog here today,  
it's hot. Like here, now, so.

A  
Yes. Duh. But

B  
So sue me. I like how the words  
glllloballlll warrrrrrming  
feel in my mouth.  
My gourmet lover says mouthfeel is very  
important.

A  
Gross. Like--  
gross.

B  
Shut up.

A  
You shut up!

B  
No you.

A  
No you!

B  
This is really nice.

A  
I'm sweaty.

B  
No I mean like  
talking.  
Hanging out. I missed us. I missed you.

B tries to hug A. They're  
both sweaty and dirty.

A  
Oh my god gross  
why do you always  
want to be all like touchy.

B  
We're having a moment!

A  
Ughh fine. You're so needy.

The BOG breathes.

B  
Marco is so right--  
sensuous food truly does  
bring people together.  
I think you should tell her.  
Live your truth!  
Even if she--

A  
Did Mom pay for you to come meet me here?

B  
What? No! What?  
No!

A  
Fuck she totally did.

B  
I mean she doesn't want us to like  
grow apart just because you're / mad at her or  
whatever

A  
/I'm not  
mad at her like  
I'm fine.

B  
Yeah fine with like  
never calling.

A  
It's just she  
like preaches at me like  
and then the time difference,

B  
OMG right the preaching.

A  
Right?

B  
I mean that bugs me too, though?  
Which you would know.  
If you like ever called  
me.

A  
Oh my god did she like  
pray over you  
pray that like god would touch me or some / shit

B  
/Um sometimes we pray together yeah

A  
Ah um.

B  
Are you like  
mad at  
me?

A

What? No! Nonono, I'm fine, it's cool, we're fine.

Long pause. The Bog breathes.  
B begins to dig a hole for  
their butter.

A (cont'd)

What are you  
thinking about?

B

The bones of my ancestors  
decayed in the ground,

A

What if we dug up a body, oh my god, what if we--

B

EW stop! We're not gonna dig up a bog body.  
Gross.

A

But like what if--

B

I'm having a spiritual experience, stop being so morbid.  
The point is my ancestors are gone,  
but the butter they churned was preserved by the bog,  
so I could eat it.  
Or like,  
so some peat cutter dude could dig it up  
and take it to like a museum and then  
I could get weirdly overly invested  
and come up with a bogus reason to take a trip to Ireland

A

Rude.

B  
and like  
drag my sister to go visit the bog and but still.  
That's pretty spiritual.

A  
While you were peeing,  
I read ancient peoples used to like survive  
on just like a walnut-sized piece of butter a  
day,  
it's so nutritious.

B  
Wow, wow.  
You pulled out your phone and like  
did research while I  
peed behind a bush.  
Wow.

A  
Ugh whatever.

B  
You are  
a lot.

A  
It said they maybe would bury it as a sacrifice.

B  
(giving up on her previous point)  
My celebrity soulmate  
says the taste is "pungent, gamey, funkyÉ"  
Rawr.  
We come back, like a year from now, we  
dig it up, we unwrap it,  
we slice off a piece, we  
spread it on like some warm bread, and--

She's basically orgasmic.  
She's down in the hole  
digging; she stops,  
deliberate, to sensuously  
slather the muck on one of



her arms. The BOG breathes  
her in.

A  
Um.

B  
Dirt under our fingernails--  
this is so gritty!  
It feels so good to be in touch with the earth!

A  
See that's the problem with like  
the hippy veganism shit, it's all about like  
replacing leather with plastic and the earth  
like the actual earth you're so "in touch with"  
is like  
drowning in plastic --

B  
You are like  
really judgmental

A  
Um sorry for having opinions, like

B  
No like I get that you like to like  
talk about Issues  
but you like don't leave a lot of  
space for other people like  
I have feelings about the earth too, like

A  
Dude what's going on?

B  
Nothing nothing no I just

A  
It's not nothing.

B  
Ok so I  
went through this box Dad has  
from like my biological Mom and

A  
Oh wow

B  
and like I knew she was a journalist and like I  
guess I  
knew a bunch of what was there, it wasn't  
like they'd kept it from me but

A  
No yeah like I actually feel like  
they did a really good job  
on that front,

B  
But like I guess I didn't really  
get it  
before?  
Like the cancer wasn't actually what.  
So like she did do all this investigative stuff  
on like nuclear um stuff, which like  
included Chernobyl?

A  
Whoa what

B  
And like Los Alamos, yeah  
she was super badass, but  
apparently she also did a bunch of like ecology  
and  
I never actually put it together before that  
when she  
when she like  
She was in Sumatra, and she was  
supposed to like fly home for my birthday party?  
There was a little card from the week before  
with an airplane full of cartoon woodland animals  
and all these airmail stamps

A

Wait 2004, right, wasn't there / like an

B

/An earthquake? And like a tsunami  
and a ton of like, yep,  
Happy birthday!  
So like ok what do you think it means  
like  
I've been having these  
dreams where she's like  
on the beach with a little notepad like  
listening to the earth speak and  
writing it down and  
I think I like collapse time  
when I think about it,  
like she's giving birth to me as it happens, like  
she's having contractions  
while like the quake  
shakes the ground like it's  
the planet itself giving birth to me  
and her tiny body riding the crumpling concrete  
and the  
wave comes in as high as houses tall as trees and  
my baby cry is the only voice you hear  
when it's finally all drowned  
no breast in my mouth only  
ocean and concrete.

A

That's bullshit.  
Like she should have been home. For your  
birthday.

Silence.

A (cont'd)

That's like so sad.  
I mean not just your mom, like the whole thing  
like  
yeah.  
Do you ever think like  
like what if she had been home?  
I think about that kind of thing a lot.

There's like this concept  
in physics  
called phase space

B  
Um.

A  
look ok  
bear with me, so phase space  
is like a representation of every possible  
state of a system  
so if you graph the right data like you can know  
the exact position and momentum at a given time,  
*any given time*  
(and I mean like in real life  
physics is much more complicated, obviously)

B  
Obviously.

A  
whatever ok but  
sometimes in undergrad I would sort of  
read the textbook like poetry  
like if you just mapped out all the possibilities  
then you could like know.  
you know?  
you could know all the what ifs.  
you could know to unchain yourself  
and get on the airplane  
with the cartoony animals  
and be at the birthday party.  
you know?

B does not know. What the  
fuck? After a moment, she  
continues digging.

B  
Mom is way better.  
I mean like your mom, or whatever.  
I mean she's our mom, she's my mom too, just.  
Whatever,

you get it.  
I'm glad Dad met her.  
I'm glad they had you.

A  
Yeah, at least she's here. For you.  
Whatever. That's not what I mean.

B  
You can like talk to me--

A  
That's deep enough. Let's bury this bitch.

B clambers out of the hole,  
grabs the butter. She opens  
its cask and pokes it.

B  
It's so soft.  
You said they would bury it like a sacrifice  
like to what, do you think?

A  
Well some scholars--

B  
Shut up, Hermione. I don't want scholars, I want  
you.  
I think it was back when God was like  
a woman.

A  
I think I'm an atheist is what I think.

B  
We offer this to you, Bog Mother!

The BOG breathes. The girls  
don't hear.

B (cont'd)  
Forgive us!  
Forgive us for how we've like  
raped you and destroyed you and  
destroyed every freaking possible solution and  
destroyed ourselves!  
Preserve this mother's milk  
this cow-mother's butter,  
and preserve us to survive our own stupid  
destructive  
destruction!

B elbows A.

A  
Um, amen!

B  
No you gotta pray too. You can't have my prayer,  
it's mine.

A  
Weirdo.

B  
Come on! Ask for what you need.  
She's speaking,  
She's listening.

The BOG breathes. The BOG  
responds,  
ferments.

A  
You are such a

B  
DO IT pleasepleasepleaseplease

A  
Fine.  
Um.  
And um please like  
keep us healthy and happy  
and stuff  
and make um the bad things stop or whatever I  
don't really believe

B  
Don't neg your own prayer, dude.

A  
Yeah. The end.

B  
Amen!

A  
Ok.

B  
Smile!

Quick selfie, and then A  
shovels peat to cover the  
butter. B is still glued to  
her phone.

B (cont'd)  
Did you see--oh my God.

A pulls out her own phone.

A  
What? Oh my God.

A's world ends, first on the  
tiny screens, then in real  
life.

It makes a lot of noise, the  
end of the world.

The BOG screams with the rest  
of the planet. All the words  
it has fermented are part of  
the scream, all the sounds it  
has ever heard.

BOG  
/NOWYOUNOW  
/bonesbonesbonesbones  
/NEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEED d d d d  
/rg rg rg forg  
/iiiiiiiiiii  
/if IF if IF if IF ifffffff if  
/badthingsstop badthings stop  
/y y y y y you  
/MINE  
/w w with w w with with  
/pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease  
/BIRTHMINE mine  
/home home home  
/WEE  
you

Eventually, the BOG is the  
only voice left, until She  
too falls silent.



FIVE.

4000 years later, early  
spring. The impossible light  
of an alien spacecraft  
lifting off, above the same  
primordial bog. A MOTHER and  
a DAUGHTER in futuristic  
jumpsuits watch the craft  
exit the atmosphere. MOTHER  
is inhumanly beautiful,  
speaking through an implanted  
device. FUTURE DAUGHTER wears  
a gas mask.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
(Immediately, wide-eyed)  
It is so quiet!

She flings her arms out to  
embrace the landscape and  
runs out into the Bog. The  
BOG sighs. It has been a long  
time since human feet have  
walked on her surface.

MOTHER  
Affirmative -  
The project is behaving irregularly -

FUTURE DAUGHTER loops back,  
removing her gas mask.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
Your mask!

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Obviously I tested the air quality.

MOTHER  
High probability of toxins -

FUTURE DAUGHTER steps into a  
wet part of the bog, covering

her foot in slime. MOTHER  
follows her every move,  
fascinated.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Ohhh, this is a disgusting sensory experience.

MOTHER  
(touching DAUGHTER's nose)  
Is your olfactory filter "in good working order?"

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Yes, no, it is only that the whole thing is so  
organic.

MOTHER  
Indeed.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
What a waste of water.  
To just sit and decay.  
So much water.

MOTHER  
It is "an embarrassment of riches!"

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
You are / such a nerd.

MOTHER  
/"Such a nerd!"

FUTURE DAUGHTER laughs.  
Perhaps MOTHER emits canned  
laughter from an ancient  
sitcom.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
I feel hungry.

MOTHER  
Fascinating.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

No I actually feel hungry sensation.

MOTHER

"Now tell me," is this hunger in spite of the disgust emotion you expressed exactly 42.6 seconds ago, or is that disgust emotion perhaps linked to the hunger?

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I do not know, I just feel hungry.  
Stop studying me.

MOTHER

It is "just my job."

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I feel hungry and I also feel frustrated emotion that I have to look at this repulsive nauseating off-putting foul bog.

MOTHER

"Way to go" with the synonyms.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Thank you.

MOTHER

"Now let's unpack that statement" about your frustrated emotion. What is it here that "gives you the willies?"

FUTURE DAUGHTER

You are  
a lot.

MOTHER

Hypothesis: you  
might feel disgusted by  
taste, smell, or touch. But  
your suit should  
keep "all the gross stuff" out.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

It is

I think it is about texture? Maybe?

Texture as a metaphor?

MOTHER

"Oooh, fancy."

FUTURE DAUGHTER

The way the land is jagged. The way  
the water is not clear or potable, how many  
blemishes

there are everywhere. Yes.

Blemishes.

Everything irregular.

There is no order and everything is mixed  
together.

MOTHER

And that makes you feel disgust emotion.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

And frustration emotion.

MOTHER

Are they the same?

FUTURE DAUGHTER

No, maybe? I am hungry.

MOTHER

Precision of language.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I feel hungry.

MOTHER

What initiates the frustration emotion?

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Nothing.

MOTHER

"Now, now."

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Nothing!

MOTHER

"I am only trying to help."

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I feel hate emotion for it!

I feel hate emotion because this

slimy spongy wet place is all wrong and dirty and  
ugly

and it is so different from home and

I wanted to feel homecoming emotion I wanted

to feel peace emotion but

instead I feel the same emotion I feel

when I look in the reflector

because I am slimy and ugly and blemished and  
irregular

and I am disgusting and

now I know what it feels like to to

see something else living that

looks like me and now

I know how everyone at home must think I look and

I

do not know how to go back and

I do not want to stay and

so I would like a snack

at least

because that is a feeling I can do something  
about!

MOTHER

About which I can do something.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

About which I can do something.

MOTHER

I acknowledge your precision of communication and  
your emotions.

MOTHER produces a small pack  
of powder or pills. FUTURE  
DAUGHTER tears into it and  
swallows.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
You are welcome.

MOTHER  
Nutrient packs must last us, so "be careful."

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
We can find nutrients here too.  
There are plants, there are probably even  
animals, stores of old edibles.

MOTHER  
Low probability.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
No, I did so much research!  
Even if I am ugly and disgusting I am useful,  
right?  
You are going to feel so much gratitude emotion  
because you brought me.  
I saw a data point, from the internet age,  
about how the ancient ancients used to bury  
"butter"--

MOTHER  
Query: butter?

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
I think an edible.  
I never heard  
quiet  
like this.

MOTHER is listening to her  
implant.

MOTHER  
"Of course!" cow fat.  
High probability of irradiation.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
The silence is  
not terrible.

She shifts her focus from  
FUTURE DAUGHTER to their  
environment.

MOTHER  
First body ten paces northeast. Samples  
from as many as possible.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
If the bodies were preserved, then the butter  
will be too.  
I believe it,  
these bogs preserved things,  
even through the uninhabitable period.  
They might be disgusting but they are useful.  
The data point said people used to survive  
on just a walnut size piece a day.  
Only butter.  
I do feel better with my blood sugar balanced.  
It is good to be here together.

MOTHER  
(to her implant)  
Query: walnut?

MOTHER and FUTURE DAUGHTER  
tromp off into the landscape  
with wonder.

The BOG breathes.

BOG  
/qu  
/t t quiet t t  
/hhhhh hate hhhh here  
/h h h h h h h h h h  
/home  
/youuuuu

SIX.

Now-ish, A stands in a post-apocalyptic phase space.

B appears.

A  
What I'm really afraid of is—

B  
We have to go now.

A  
This isn't about Mom, it's about us.

B  
About that. I don't really get it.

A  
Wait are you serious?

B  
Um yeah. A lecture about physics isn't like--

A  
Awww, you're such a dumb blonde at heart,  
I love you.

B  
That's like so mean.  
I am trying to have like  
a real conversation with you.  
Like I literally do not know what you want.  
You wrap it up in all this jargon and  
wishywashy crap, and so it's like  
impossible to find the real  
you in any of it?  
Has it ever occurred to you that like  
maybe I'm smarter about some things than you are?  
Why do you always assume I'm stupid?



A  
I don't think you're [stupid]--

B  
Yeah. You so do.

A  
Nuh-uh.

B  
Yeah-huh.

A  
I'm not trying to like  
offend you or anything, I--

B  
Um if you call people dumb then like  
yes. It's pretty clear that you're  
looking down on me.

A  
I don't look down on you!  
I just like.  
Like I don't think you understand how  
cutthroat academia is.

B  
Yeah. I know you don't think I / understand,  
that's--

A  
/That's not what I mean, I just.  
You've never experienced--

B throws some bog mud at A.

B  
I know I didn't go to college.

A  
Yeah, you didn't!

A throws some bog mud back at  
B.

B  
I freaking know, you don't need to like  
constantly remind me!  
I know you think all my stuff about like  
self-actualization and whatever is  
bullshit but like  
have you ever considered that maybe  
I'm doing work on myself that you like  
don't have the courage or the  
emotional intelligence to do?

Silent, tense moment while  
they both watch mud dribble  
down each other's faces. A  
starts to laugh.

B (cont'd)  
Don't laugh at me!

A  
I'm not! I just--

B scrapes the mud off  
wherever it landed on her.  
She deliberately smears it  
onto A's face.

B  
Yeah, well.

A  
I really think you're incredibly [smart]--

B  
Sorry dude. Do better.

B self-actualizes to a higher  
plane of emotional existence.

A

(cynical humor)

Yeah congrats on like self-actualizing to a a a  
higher plane of emotional existence!

A's world ends. She is left  
alone in a vast void of  
possibilities.

B pops back in.

B

Can I just say though  
that I would like never

A

Ok

yeah

fine

ok

like

what I'm really afraid of is--

Everything resets to the same  
moment when the world ended.

B

We have to go now.

A

This isn't about Mom, it's about us.

B

About that.

Like it's really for the two of us to decide,  
not just you.

Like you're not the only person  
in the conversation.

A

She's not your mom.

B  
Fuck you.

A  
Sorry.  
I'm sorry.  
I'm so sorry that was.  
I'm sorry. Shit. I  
I know I just.  
I  
i need you. i'm sorry.

B  
No, fuck you. That like.  
Honestly like where have you even been  
while she's gotten sicker and sicker?  
Do you live at home?  
Do you clean her kitchen?  
Do you clean her bathroom?  
Do you like help her use the bathroom?

A  
look, i'm sorry, it came out wrong, i -

B  
No, I think it came out exactly what you think.  
Do you know how often you just like  
say mean stuff to me? And like  
I let it go, I constantly let it go,  
and like.  
That's not super healthy.

A  
I want to do better, I hear you, I -

B  
I have done so much  
to like try to protect you and help you.  
I've been such  
a good big sister, and you like  
don't even think of like  
thanking me, no,

A

I mean yeah, thank you.

B

I just think I need like  
a break.

Right now I'm trying to  
have fewer toxic people in my life? And.

A

I'm not toxic.

B

Yeah, well.

I just might need to not do like  
trips like this.

A

i can - i can change? i can--

B

I mean. You can't change like  
who you are.

A

Um. Wait so. You don't like who i am?  
Just like  
in general?

B

Sorry dude.

B walks away into a life full  
of positivity and healthy  
relationships.

A

...

A's world ends again,  
smaller, perhaps just  
fireworks celebrating B's  
brilliance.

B refuses to fully disappear  
into the end of the world.

B  
You know that's total bullshit though, right?  
Like you wouldn't say that, you don't  
really believe that, like  
stop this, what is this?

A  
No fine ok like  
ok.  
Like in actual literal actual real life  
what I'm really afraid of is—

Everything resets to the same  
moment when the world ended.

B  
We have to go now.

A  
This isn't about her, it's about us.

B  
About that. Now that I've had a bit to like  
internalize? your like  
revelation or whatever, I'm sorry but like.  
What you're doing is sinful.

A  
Wait are you serious?

B  
I mean don't get me wrong, I love you.  
Hate the sin, love the sinner, amiright?  
But yeah, like. I mean like.  
Like but why do we talk about sexual orientation  
or whatever as an identity?  
There's so much more to you  
than who you want to have sex with.  
Like I think the solution is just for  
homosexual people to be celibate! It's  
not like that big of a deal.

A

I mean it's a huge deal? You're not -

B

I guess it would just like impact whether I'd want you around my like future kids, or whatever.

A

You would keep me from knowing your kids if I like have romantic relationships.

B

No nononono, not like normal romantic relationships, OMG. Just if you were like. Living in sin or whatever. Besides, sidebar, how does that even work? Like in terms of physics, we all know how much you love a good physics lecture!

A

That's not an ok thing to like ask.

B

Oh sorry. I mean yeah, well.

A

...yeah.

B

I mean. I can't change like the Bible.

A

Um.

B

Sorry dude.

B ascends into heavenly light  
to a chorus of hallelujahs.

A

(bitter)

Wow, way to like ascend into rays of heavenly  
light,  
nice chorus of hallelujahs.

A's world ends, smaller. She  
stands again in her phase-  
space.

B clambers back down out of  
heaven and puts her hands on  
her hips.

A (cont'd)

You wouldn't have done this.

B

Don't talk about me like I'm dead, bitch.

A

I'm scared you're gonna like

B

What, turn into Mom?  
You're the one who looks like  
exactly like her.

A

Oh my god stopppppppp I just  
ok no I'm actually like afraid of so many things  
but  
but the worst isn't all this interpersonal stuff!  
NBD!  
Like what if the actual end of the world came  
right now?  
I mean like it's basically already happening,  
right?  
What do you think about  
at the end of the world? What if I had used less



plastic?

What if we hadn't come to Ireland and instead  
we'd gone to all those protests, what if like  
those corporations had gotten burnt down, like  
BURNT to smoldering toxic ashes  
or like ok this doesn't mean i want to talk about  
it but  
what if healthcare hadn't sucked so much  
what if healthcare  
hadn't been like only for rich people  
but like a fucking human right for humans and so  
Mom had Mom had  
what if the guilt  
and the privilege  
what if i had used less plastic what if the  
flooding  
and the drought and but  
really like what if i  
had used less plastic?!

I mean I totally think I could survive.  
The end of the world, I mean.  
I'm pretty sure. But like not  
alone?  
and and  
and then what about what feels like the end of  
the world,  
like pandemics or rejection letters or even like  
even the little tiny  
ends of the world like like  
I think I'm infertile, did I tell you that yet?  
I might not tell you that.  
Yet.  
What I'm really afraid of is you  
turning out to be just like her.  
What I'm really afraid of is losing you.

B

Well stop it

A

Who would I tell,  
if not you?

B

Um. Mom.

A

No like my strategy, like honestly my strategy  
is hold out and wait and just casually like  
never go home until like  
she's like

With a gesture, A conducts  
another end of the world.  
Lots of explosions. Over the  
roar, as they are ripped from  
each other's grasp and thrown  
into the void, A and B shout  
to each other.

A (cont'd)

Yeah! And then I don't have to like

B

You know that's super dumb, right?

A

Is it though?

The BOG keeps breathing and  
fermenting the language of  
the apocalypse.

BOG

/YOU

/nnnn nnnn nnnn

/mom?

/om om om om om om

/only only alone only

/neeeeeeeeee d d d d d d d

SEVEN.

4000 years ago, MOTHER stalks  
back into the bog brandishing  
a comb.

MOTHER

Enough of this nonsense!  
Aren't they lighting the solstice fires already?  
Will you not come!

PAST DAUGHTER is hidden from  
her sight, watching. She  
giggles silently.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
Willful girl.

As MOTHER makes her way  
further into the bog, she  
trips, a graceless and simple  
fall that knocks her head  
horribly hard on a rock. She  
lies still, the wet of the  
bog seeping up her dress for  
a moment. PAST DAUGHTER  
scrambles out and hurtles  
over to her side.

PAST DAUGHTER  
Amá!

She shakes MOTHER, who moans  
and comes around a bit.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
Amá!! What--what am I to do, what--

MOTHER  
Amá?

The Bog breathes.

PAST DAUGHTER

No, no tis I, you clumsy cow, get yourself up--  
You be needed!

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)

Help! Anyone! Help me! My Amá!

No one answers. A deathly  
silence.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)

Why then did we come so far  
from the village?  
We could help have gotten, we--

Suddenly MOTHER is a little  
more conscious, and she grips  
PAST DAUGHTER urgently.

MOTHER

They will you blame.

PAST DAUGHTER

What? Get up--

MOTHER

Won't they think you wanted to eat, now,  
to eat your fill and not share  
with your crafty old Amá? Won't they whisper  
you've me killed for to take my meager shares  
to make your own belly full.

PAST DAUGHTER grabs the comb  
MOTHER has dropped and begins  
to tame her hair.

PAST DAUGHTER

Tis turned my heart, get up, then.  
Won't we go, won't I braid my locks up pretty and  
do as you say--

MOTHER

No dancing for a burial, sure.  
Cannot you see I be  
broken?  
A poor harvest a sacrifice--  
When you'll be burying your butter each every  
summer,  
won't you be feeding me, now?

PAST DAUGHTER

You feed *me*, yourself.

The Bog breathes.

MOTHER

No matter where you will bury it at all.  
Perhaps it be best you travel  
over the mountains, get far gone, to the gods,  
to my Amá--

PAST DAUGHTER

Stop it! Stop it! Why were your--  
Amá, your eye.  
Tis filling up red with blood.

MOTHER

Would you be staying here,  
won't you be the next buried, sure.

PAST DAUGHTER

I will fight, I will ye heal, I will--

MOTHER

I I I,  
me me me

PAST DAUGHTER

Why then were you so clumsy, why so -

MOTHER

Turn you away, then, turn away your face.

She pushes her daughter's  
face away. She gasps in pain.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
Won't the butter we made  
feed me on my way the Otherworld, now?  
I watched when my Amá went.  
Do not.

The Bog breathes.

PAST DAUGHTER  
Why?

MOTHER dies. PAST DAUGHTER  
keens her grief, and it grows  
and grows into the sound of a  
village, the sound of regular  
life, the sound of women and  
children and  
responsibilities.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
Why.

PAST DAUGHTER looks down at  
her MOTHER's body, slowly  
sinking into the bog. She  
turns to run away, then turns  
back, and scrabbles with her  
hands to bury the body of her  
MOTHER in the Bog, beside  
their butter. When she is  
finished, she swallows and  
stands to face the village,  
gathering their comb and  
shawls, fists clenched.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
Over the mountains, get far gone then?  
I be hungry, Amá.  
Would it angry make you if I  
took the butter along?

I'll be digging it up. So if you be angry  
you'd best be intervening, now.  
Amn't I thinking of just myself, myself--

PAST DAUGHTER unearths the  
butter.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
I be unwrapping it...

She waits.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
Won't you be reminding  
what thanks give the earth for keeping it?  
Come on then!

She unwraps it, little by  
little, to reveal a clean,  
white mass.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
I be breathing it in, the scent of your work.  
How dare I take it from you, you must right be  
angry,  
you must rightly show me your anger, now,  
now.

She waits. She inhales. The  
BOG breathes.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
I be digging my hands in!  
Only for taking a smidgen, smaller than a nut.  
Won't there be plenty for you to share?

She digs her finger into the  
butter. She pulls out a  
walnut-sized bite.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)

My mouth be full of juices. Come on, then.  
My lips be opening, like a kiss, like a word.  
I need you!  
Will you not come at all?

She breathes through her  
mouth the scent, the barest  
hint of taste on the freezing  
air. She brings the butter  
closer and closer to her  
tongue, and--

She screams a sob into the  
butter. We do not see her  
take a bite.

She turns away from the  
village and runs further into  
the bog, alone.

The BOG breathes her in.

BOG  
/amaaaaaaaaaaaaa  
/taketaketake  
/you y y y y  
/broken thanksssssss k k k  
/needfeedneedfeedneeeeeeedfeeeeeed  
/watch tch tch



EIGHT.

4000 years from now, summer.  
There is a rough shelter on  
the edge of the bog. MOTHER  
has disinterred the coppery  
fermented torso of the mother  
who died in the bog 8000  
years before. There is a  
strong resemblance.

MOTHER

"Hello, handsome."

If I crawl

in next to you

could I get that "gooorgeous" patina in--

She scans the body for data.

MOTHER (cont'd)

At least a few millennia?

Before the collapse.

"Alas, poor Yoric--"

See, we did not leave culture behind  
when we "fled to the stars."

What was your favorite

Shakespeare, "Yoric"?

Or had he not happened yet? Primitive.

MOTHER receives a query  
through her implant.

MOTHER (cont'd)

Affirmative, of course

"the project" is

still alive. What

were you expecting -

A squeak through the implant,  
and then a statement.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
But I was assured  
that support had been secured  
for "the next stages of the initiative."

Another statement from her  
implant.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
It is  
a terrible shame.  
Affirmative. I will  
prepare her.

MOTHER turns back to the bog  
body.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
Want some  
humor, "Yoric" "old pal?"  
Some irony:  
I was on the verge of saving the humans, and  
now...  
Query: etiquette for informing--

FUTURE DAUGHTER drags on the  
deformed antler of a mutant  
deer.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Will that breed disease out in the air?

MOTHER  
I am the head doctor / of

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
/Yeah, yeah, "do not talk to me,"

MOTHER  
/Do not talk to me about disease, do not mock me.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Look what I found!

MOTHER takes in the contorted  
antlers.

FUTURE DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
A deer must have shed them!  
This means there are living animals.  
This means we can hunt.

MOTHER  
No eating *that*.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Then you will starve. The sun is not enough  
power, there are no charging stations, there is  
not--

MOTHER  
Meat is for animals.

Silence. MOTHER drags the  
corpse back to the hole from  
whence it came and shovels  
dirt over it.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
We are running out of nutrient packs.  
How long has it been? They are not coming back.  
An emergency, maybe, or a glitch.

MOTHER  
They have been in contact.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
You said--

MOTHER  
They feel concern  
emotion. Consider  
the statistics.  
The technically and genetically unimproved were--  
violent.  
Unpredictable.  
I was aware of the high  
risk.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

What, so they abandon us and just go on--

MOTHER

Not

exactly.

They have defunded  
the project.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I am a person.

MOTHER

Égiven that I used historic genetic samples  
rather than an accepted modern genome,  
given that you have no tech implanted [they do  
not agree]-

FUTURE DAUGHTER

That is exactly what they used to say about the  
octopi/--

MOTHER

/Octopodes.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

/that they were just animals, that they did not  
have feelings or--

MOTHER

Affirmative.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Then do something about it!

MOTHER

It is not that simple.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

How is it not simple?

You think I am a person. Right? Mother?

MOTHER

Do not name me that.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

But you are the one who made me.

MOTHER

In a lab "for research purposes only!"

FUTURE DAUGHTER

There is no such thing as a mother, is there?  
You are not my mother.

MOTHER

Not in the "good old fashioned" sense, no.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I hate you.

MOTHER

That is typical.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Is this  
why we came here?

MOTHER

I have only  
just been informed.  
Exactly 186.2  
seconds ago.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I bet you knew about this all along.  
And you brought me here to what, breed? Release  
into the wild? "Get in touch"  
with my natural habitat before  
before -

MOTHER

Do  
not be afraid. The  
euthanasia procedure in  
the Lab is "extremely humane."

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I am not just an experiment!  
Euthanasia is for  
for animals!

MOTHER calculates a moment.

MOTHER

If  
you prefer, there  
is another way. I too  
prefer less  
waste of life.  
"Release into the wild," / as  
you said.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

/ This is not happening--

MOTHER

Do not be afraid! DO  
NOT BE AFRAID!

FUTURE DAUGHTER

You are not going extinct! You do not get to  
yell!

MOTHER

I made you, and  
"if you want to get it over with" here,  
I can end you.  
It can be gentle.  
Simple.  
"Your body your choice!"

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
I am not violent.  
If you want to kill me,  
you are the violent one.

The BOG breathes.

MOTHER  
It has nothing to do with "what I want."  
This initiative has  
always been about more than  
"any individual component."

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
I am a person. Not a a a  
component.

MOTHER  
About  
whether we could  
come home safely, or initiate  
"rediversification efforts."

Silence.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Are you serious?

MOTHER  
"Afraid so."

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
But you said--  
That night I felt ostracized emotion  
in the Lab play group  
because the others were perfect and and  
perfect and  
I just had acne,

MOTHER  
I helped you identify  
an ancient medical condition and potential cures.  
It was a "pleasant evening" of "shared learning."

The BOG breathes.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Was it a lie?

Were you lying that I could be  
absorbed into society, that I could  
integrate?

MOTHER

You have  
learned so much.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Zits.

MOTHER

Query -

FUTURE DAUGHTER

It is a synonym, slang, it does not matter.  
All I get is zits.

MOTHER

It  
is science.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Do you feel love emotion for me?

The BOG breathes.

MOTHER

Yes.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Say it.

MOTHER

IIIIIIIII.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Have you said it to anyone before?  
In bed? To a leader?



MOTHER  
IIIIIIIIIIII--

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
I love you.

MOTHER  
That is--

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Typical?

MOTHER  
I am "so sorry."

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Why?

MOTHER  
Because you were fascinating.  
So insightful,  
even with your primitive biological cognition  
systems. "Exquisite"  
to watch you fail,  
and still try.  
The iterations.  
You were so  
adaptive  
and resilient, and yet  
so fragile.  
Because you were  
so fragile.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Do not talk about me in past tense syntax! I am  
not dead.

MOTHER  
I acknowledge your  
preference. However  
regarding survival:  
if there are others here---  
others who survived, in different ways,  
You may "need to protect yourself."

FUTURE DAUGHTER

This is you experimenting still.  
Seeing if I would cause harm.  
You want me to defend myself,  
like the primate I am?

MOTHER

I can arrange  
to leave more nutrient packs  
when they come to collect me--

FUTURE DAUGHTER

You care about me.  
You have taken care of me, you laugh with me, you  
enjoy me. I am your legacy, your mark on the  
world, you do not want--  
to leave me.  
You cannot leave me!  
You cannot leave!  
You--you--

FUTURE DAUGHTER is  
hyperventilating.

MOTHER

Your heart rate is  
"dangerously high."  
"Let's take a deeeep breath."

FUTURE DAUGHTER

I hate you, you--

MOTHER

"Let's take a deeeep breath."  
"Let's take a deeeep breath."

FUTURE DAUGHTER wheezes and  
continues to panic, more and  
more.

MOTHER (cont'd)  
It is unadvisable  
to sustain anxiety at this  
level for so long.  
"This will help" calm you.

MOTHER approaches FUTURE  
DAUGHTER with a small  
syringe. She taps it for air  
bubbles. FUTURE DAUGHTER  
shies away, still panicking.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Do not touch me--  
you--

MOTHER  
It is only  
a sedative.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
It is not a sedative!

The BOG breathes.

MOTHER  
Do  
not be afraid.  
"I am only trying to help."

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Do not touch me! You are  
one of them! You are all  
trying to exterminate me, trying to -  
Who are you?  
You are not my mother. Who are you?

MOTHER  
I know "almost everything."  
But I do not know who I am becoming.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
I do.

FUTURE DAUGHTER bends  
swiftly, and picks up her  
antler.

She hurls herself at MOTHER,  
who despite her best efforts,  
cannot stab her with the  
syringe.

The BOG gasps at the  
violence.

A bloody interlude later,  
FUTURE DAUGHTER stands  
panting over MOTHER's corpse,  
still holding the antler.  
Even the BOG holds its  
breath. What silence!

In the quiet, a majestic  
mutant deer walks tentatively  
across the stage to graze on  
the sweet grass. It  
transforms the light and  
sound of the whole world for  
a few breaths, momentarily  
alive and present.

FUTURE DAUGHTER bends, lithe  
as the deer, and touches the  
ground. She takes a shaky  
breath.

BOG  
/needfeedbreed  
/exquisite t t t  
/anim anima animal  
/needhatefragile  
/h h h h h h h h h h home  
/love?  
/usssssssssssssssssssss

NINE.

Outside time. PAST DAUGHTER,  
FUTURE DAUGHTER, and A are  
all in the Bog, alone in  
their own worlds, not seeing  
each other.

A  
No so yeah it turns out  
I've got this this  
thing with my hormones, it's the most  
boring thing in the world, whatever.  
I wouldn't tell Mom.  
And I mean it's not like I was actively like  
trying to get pregnant? But.

PAST DAUGHTER returns to the  
place where her mother was  
buried. Her clothes are worn,  
her body slimmer, but her  
eyes are bright.

PAST DAUGHTER  
Hallo, Amá?

The BOG breathes.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
Hasn't it been an entire season now,  
summer to winter and still  
I hate that you  
be such a clumsy cow, so selfish.  
I miss you terrible!  
Independence  
was not a notion I brang about  
until I was alone with me so long.  
Now isn't there but nothing to stop my  
mind from running along, right unnatural.  
Did you want a baby?  
Be it wrong? Stir up the want I cannot, for going  
back  
or finding a new village or a man or --  
it be a nice cave, I warm and cozy make it.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
A cave of my own.  
Privilege  
was not a notion I brang about  
until I was alone with me so long, mine.

The BOG breathes.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
I know you rightly angered be, Amá.  
Me me me, sure you had the right of it.  
Here amn't I even forgetting your face, now,  
remembering only the shape of the wee brown spot  
on your back but not  
you. What I miss is your care for me. Me.  
It be right unnatural.  
The winters harsh,  
the summers far to dry.  
Aren't you telling me, aren't you speaking right  
clear?  
"Broken, broken!"  
So I be bringing you a new one, now.

PAST DAUGHTER produces a  
newly churned, wrapped pat of  
butter. She begins to dig a  
hole to bury it.

PAST DAUGHTER (cont'd)  
I will keep burying it for you, and maybe  
you might forgive?

PAST DAUGHTER lifts her  
butter in the same gesture as  
her mother and B did, a  
ritual. She begins to bury it  
beside MOTHER.

A

I think I'd be an amazing mom, is all.  
I think I'd be incredible at it,  
I'd fucking kill it, I think I'd love  
unconditionally and I think I'd also  
hate it and I'm so relieved and also devastated  
and and

FUTURE DAUGHTER sits beside  
her MOTHER's corpse. A radio  
crackles -- a long, staticky  
transmission still live  
through her MOTHER's implant,  
and then a female voice  
asking a barely audible  
query.

FUTURE DAUGHTER

Who will take care of me?  
I am very fragile. I have  
all sorts of old fashioned needs like cancer  
and tastebuds and boredom.  
They do not know about  
boring emotion.  
They have a steady drip of  
information all the time  
through their implants.  
They have never had an idea  
come from inside.  
They do not know what it feels like  
to have bacteria  
that break down your food, do not know  
about mold and salt  
And so they think I will die. But  
they forget my mother,  
my real mother.  
There is such a thing.  
She made me butter, thousands of years ago,  
She held it in her peat-bog hands.  
She churned the toxins in her clouds She  
strained them through the rain -  
She is so good at cleaning up after you  
and you do not even notice.  
I have no dirt and water tables

but I do have a liver  
I take after my mother.  
I have all your shame emotion,  
I am all you would like to never be again.  
I have no rain clouds but I have some tear ducts  
because my ancient eyes need lubrication  
animal that I am.  
She drips the acid residue of their wars down on  
me and tells me how.  
I can process this poison.

FUTURE DAUGHTER leaps to her  
feet and scrabbles at the  
dirt with her hands, digging  
a hole. She begins to bury  
MOTHER, adorning her with the  
bog, transforming her into  
the BOG.

A digs in the dirt.

A  
and I can see how if we hurt Her --  
like the Bog Mother, Mother Earth,  
whatever you meant  
how She like wants us and She births us but  
She hates us.  
Understandably.

FUTURE DAUGHTER's hands snag  
on something soft in the  
dirt. She pulls up what she  
has found: human hair.

The BOG breathes.

A finds a bone. The bone  
becomes PAST DAUGHTER's hand.  
The hair FUTURE DAUGHTER is  
holding becomes A's hair.

PAST DAUGHTER  
I the world have right broken, sure.



A  
Oh, hey, what's up?  
(holding up another bone)  
Are these like  
yours?

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Greetings!  
You must be my ancestors! I feel glad emotion to  
meet you! And that must be the butter for me.

PAST DAUGHTER pulls her  
butter out of the bog and  
holds it, possessive.

A  
Um sorry what? I think you mean for me?

PAST DAUGHTER  
Tisn't all about you, now.  
'Tis sure my Amá's butter still.

FUTURE DAUGHTER brandishes  
her bloody deer antler.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Feed me. Or know  
I can feed myself. I am  
"violent and unpredictable."

A  
Look, like, we're all just like trying to survive  
and like generosity in late capitalism is a  
bitch, / right?

A snatches the butter from  
PAST DAUGHTER.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
/Query: bitch?

PAST DAUGHTER  
/Beg pardon!

A  
Like.

The BOG breathes. She  
ferments language beneath  
time passing.

PAST DAUGHTER  
Be wary. Isn't she your daughter, sure?  
Once you feed her, perhaps she'll let you rot in  
the muck.

A  
Oh no

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
She is your mother. If you let her live,  
she will try to kill you.

A  
But--the butter.

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Give it to me!  
I am an animal, do not test me.

PAST DAUGHTER  
It be a dying gift  
she be dying, I do be dying, are ye all not  
rotting  
and you can do but nothing about it?  
Entropy was not a notion I brang about  
until I was alone so long.

A  
But the butter doesn't rot, it ferments.  
I love that.

PAST DAUGHTER  
Love was not a notion I brang about before--

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Love emotion is not in my range of experiences  
anymore, only hunger.

Maybe I am just a glitch.  
Maybe my progenitor was correct.

PAST DAUGHTER looks at FUTURE  
DAUGHTER. They see each  
other, somehow, fully, with  
intimate recognition.

PAST DAUGHTER  
No, haven't you got the need in you, sure,  
and sure the guilt?

FUTURE DAUGHTER  
Need and guilt.  
I killed her. My caretaker.

PAST DAUGHTER  
Didn't I do the same,  
by running off, by not catching her fall?  
I recognize you fine.

A  
I hate loving  
things that are dying.  
I'm so scared to--

With a sickening jolt, the  
aural world of the play is  
suddenly a hospital in the  
present. We hear a heart  
monitor, perhaps a far-off  
intercom announcement, oxygen  
sighing into nostrils like  
the ticking of a slow, slow  
clock. A has not moved--but  
the hospital surrounds her.  
The BOG's sounds coalesce  
into a BOG MOTHER with a  
sequential, sensical, sick  
voice.

This manifestation of the BOG  
is played by the actor who  
played Mother. She sits up,

now adorned in moss and  
lichen and muck.

PAST and FUTURE DAUGHTERS  
rise up and deck each other  
in moss, becoming part of the  
BOG, no longer human.

A (cont'd)  
Hey, Ma.

BOG  
My sweetest girl.  
Will you pray with me?

A  
I mean hi, nice to see you too.

BOG  
What's that tone?

A  
Nothing.

BOG  
No, not nothing.

A  
Yeah, nothing.

BOG  
I'm at peace. God showed me  
that all your hard work and striving  
is going to lead you to the end of yourself, and  
there in the depths  
you will come home to His loving arms,  
and you will find hope again, and  
that just gives me so much joy.

A  
Sounds great.

BOG

"Great." What do you mean?

A

You know sure. Let's pray.

Dear god. Um. Ugh. I mean like to who it may concern:

The heart monitor speeds up.

A (cont'd)

I want my mom to get well.

I want her faith to be--I want the miracles she believes--

Look but let's be real.

She tries things for like a day  
and then she says You've told her to pray  
instead, and like. If you're so full of  
loooooove then

why don't you want her  
to actually get well? If this is  
your love

then it frankly doesn't feel very loving.

It's weird I'm even here, right? Why would I like  
confront her about this now? For like,  
closure or some shit? That sucks.

This sucks.

Anyway like You get it. Et cetera.

Um. Amen.

BOG

Sweetie. I just.

Listen, I get angry too.

I hate this this this  
shit.

I hate it. I hate feeling this way.

A

Ok.

BOG

/There, we agree.

A

/There are actual things you can actually do to--

BOG

You have no idea what I've tried and done.

A

That's true. Because you don't  
talk about it.

BOG

It's exhausting. It's the most  
boring thing in the world.  
You don't want to hear  
about all the research and doctors and trials  
and--  
The wisdom of this world is nothing compared to--

A

I'm not here to be preached at.

BOG

What are you here for?

A

What kind of question even is that?

BOG

You're angry at *me*. Not just at / God.

A

/Yeah, because you look right through me, because  
you know like  
nothing about me anymore  
because we can't talk about anything  
for more than like two seconds  
without it becoming about like the Bible and  
we fight about anything I care about,  
like do you know literally anything I care about?

BOG

You have such a heart for justice in the world.

A

What does that even mean?

BOG

You love your sister. You worry about her.

A

Yes, but that's not like. That's pretty shallow.

BOG

...Let's just be quiet together.

A

Sure.

BOG

Ok.

Praise you, Lord.

They sit in silence together.  
A fidgets. The BOG prays in  
tongues.

After a long time of awkward  
semi-silence and tongues, the  
BOG concludes.

BOG (cont'd)

Praise You, Lord.

A

Um. Yeah.

BOG

You look good.

A

No I don't.

I shouldn't have come.

A places the butter she took  
from PAST DAUGHTER as if it's  
an offering at her mother's  
bedside, and turns to leave.

BOG

I want to ask you--to forgive me.

A

What? I mean.

BOG

I know you want me to try other kinds of  
treatment.

And I know you're struggling with your sexuality.

A

What the fuck.

I'm not struggling, it's like  
my identity. I'm a a  
person, like.

Who told you?

BOG

A mother knows. What I'm saying is that I love  
you.

A

Right, and then you're gonna like say there's  
healing for that, yeah no.

BOG

How do you know what I'm going to say?

A

Whatever. No. You don't get to--you don't get to  
to  
like come to the logical conclusion of all your  
choices, and then like.  
It's so selfish, that you  
want us to be all like warm and fuzzy



after all the  
just because you're you're

BOG  
dying in the flesh, to rise in the spirit--

A  
You wouldn't even say that.  
I don't know what you'd actually say.  
I have no idea what you would say.

BOG  
Yes.

A  
I mean like no.  
I'm not gonna like participate  
in your morbid fucking death party.

BOG  
It's not for me.  
You feel so safe being angry at me, you feel so  
safe blaming me.  
Who will make you feel safe  
when I'm gone? Who will be your wall  
to throw cruelty at?  
Who will be the person you can blame?  
It is not for me.

A  
Then who is it for?  
Who the fuck is any of this for?  
It's all you.  
You you you you you you

Language breaks, and the peat  
bog's sounds overtake the  
hospital. Time passes so fast  
it seems like it is going  
backwards.

BOG  
You.

```

/you
/you you you you you you you you you you you
/want
/ownminemine
/what it feels like
/take care
/hands h h h h h h h h h
/broken k k k
/wee brown spot
/lovewanthate love
/fragile
/YOUCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCC

```

TEN.

Suddenly everything is the same again. Now-ish, B and A at the bog, B covered in muck down in the hole, just having prayed. The BOG MOTHER and DAUGHTERS are still present, fermenting language.

B elbows A.

B  
Come on! Ask for what you /need.

```
BOG
/needfeed
/lisssssssssssten
```

B  
/She's speaking,  
She's listening.

The BOG breathes.

A  
You are such a

B

DO IT pleasepleasepleaseplease

A almost sees the BOG.

A

Fine.

Um.

And um please like  
help us like let go of the bad things

BOG

/takecare

A

/or like help us help us trust that we'll be  
taken care of  
help us be less bitchy when we're scared  
help us know each other, really know like  
Yeah. The end.

B

Amen!

A

Ok.

B

Smile!

Quick selfie, and then A  
shovels peat to cover the  
butter. B is still glued to  
her phone.

B (cont'd)

Did you see--oh my God.

A

What?

A shudders with the weight of  
her whole odyssey. The BOG  
MOTHER and DAUGHTERS shake  
with her, rising out of the  
much to loom over A and B.

A looks over at B's phone for  
a moment.

A (cont'd)  
Oh my god.

B  
It's---we need to go, now--  
Dad tried to call, there's like no reception,  
did you--we need to like go.

A  
But--

B  
they're at the hospital again.

A  
Finish burying it.  
So someone a thousand years from now can--

B  
There's no such thing  
as a thousand years from now.

A  
i just /need

BOG  
/needtake  
/w w we

A  
i can't  
i want it to be a we, us together

B

me too.  
i'm here.

A  
me too.

Silence.

A (cont'd)  
we have to get to the airport.

B  
us.  
both.

A  
i hate this.

B  
duh.

A  
we should like  
like smuggle her a  
walnut-size piece  
of fancy butter and

B  
how come we never talk about this? It's  
something we have in common.

Silence. A lays her head on  
B's sweaty shoulder.

A  
yeah.  
i'm gonna tell her. i think.

B squeezes A's hand. They  
turn to slog out of the bog.  
The BOG breathes.

All three actors playing the  
BOG ferment language more  
clearly than we have ever  
heard it before, though it is  
still circular not fully real  
to our ears.

BOG  
mine mine mine

A  
What?

B  
What?

A  
No I just like thought I heard a thing.

B  
Dunno.

A  
No big deal.

BOG  
need? need

B  
You ok?

A  
I mean no.

B  
Yeah.

A  
What about you?

B  
like.

BOG  
need mine?

A  
There it is again, did you---

B  
The train?

A  
No like someone talking?

B  
...sorry.

They leave. A turns back  
alone at the last moment and  
listens hard.

FUTURE DAUGHTER unwraps the  
butter MOTHER is holding.

FUTURE DAUGHTER takes a  
walnut size piece and eats it  
with immense pleasure. She  
goes to take another piece,  
and then turns instead to  
PAST DAUGHTER.

FUTURE DAUGHTER offers her  
butter to PAST DAUGHTER,  
tentative. PAST DAUGHTER  
reaches out. She opens her  
mouth, she inhales.

PAST DAUGHTER tastes the  
butter, finally. What  
pleasure!

BOG  
/take  
/youuuuuuuuu

needfeed mine home  
...love?

A  
hello?

BOG  
mine?

A stands and stares into the  
BOG's eyes for a moment, and  
it stares back, reaching.

With the help of her  
DAUGHTERS, the BOG MOTHER  
dons the world like a cloak,  
larger than life. She is  
majestic and everywhere.

The BOG DAUGHTERS feed their  
BOG MOTHER a walnut-size  
piece of butter.

As the light fades, Her  
sounds ferment back into the  
naturalistic sounds of a peat  
bog.

**THE END**



## WORKS CITED

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